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P I E R R O T

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A HARD WINTER

PIERROT

a novel by

RAYMOND QUENEAU

Translated from the French by

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1-62

1910

John Lehmann

London

FIRST PUBLISHED IN GREAT BRITAIN IN 1910 BY
JOHN LEHMANN LTD
6 HENRIETTA STREET, LONDON W.C.2
MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
PURNELL AND SONS LTD
PAULTON (SOMERSET) AND LONDON
SET IN 11 PT. GARAMOND, 2 PT. LEADED

This book was first published in 1913
by *Librairie Gallimard*, Paris, under the
title PIERROT MON AMI.

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I

“TAKE YOUR specs off, now,” Tortose told Pierrot, “take ’em off, if you want to look as though you worked here.”

Pierrot obeyed, sliding his spectacles carefully into their case. He could still see about a couple of yards in front of him ; but the end of the tunnel and, beyond that, the seats reserved for the public were blurred in a mist.

“ Now,” continued Tortose—*Monsieur* Tortose—“ you grab ’em as they get to the Cake Walk, you take ’em by the wrists like this, hold on tight, and then swing ’em bang in the draught. Up to you how long you keep ’em there, it just depends, you’ll learn all that in time. Right. Now off we go again, I’ll be the woman, I roam up, course at the Cake Walk I draw back, goes without saying, you grab hold of my wrists, that’s the ticket, now you drag me along, good, then you stick me in the draught, very good. Get it ? ”

“ I get it, Monsieur Tortose.”

“ Okay. Now get along outside with Petit Pouce and Paradis and wait for the mugs to roll up. Understand ? ”

“ Yes, Monsieur Tortose.”

Pierrot put on his glasses again and went to look for

Petit Pouce and Paradis, who stood outside the booth smoking in silence. It was not yet dark, but the long summer afternoon was drawing in, barometer set fair: bathed in the warm blue dusk, they didn't feel up to a lot of talk. Like the others, Pierrot lit a cigarette. A few people were strolling about the Amusement Park, but not enough to get things really started. So far, only the bumper cars had begun to bang into each other on the Dodgems Track. The Dobbie horses, still without riders, pranced slowly to the tune of the steam organ: the nostalgic music this breathed out contributed, no doubt, to the present mood of the Palace of Laughter personnel. In her pay-box, Mme Tortose was knitting.

People in twos and threes, and, more rarely, in ones, passed to and fro, forming and re-forming into groups, but not yet into crowds, laughing a little. Petit Pouce, who had smoked his cigarette down, nipped the glowing end between finger and thumb, and spat the butt an appreciable distance away from him.

"Well, me old china," he said to Pierrot, "how d'you like gaffing in with us?"

"Not much to it, so far."

"Yeah? Just you wait till midnight."

Paradis, jerking his head towards Pierrot, told Petit Pouce: "He's the geezer made 67,000 on a Coney Island, t'other day."

Of all pin-table machines, Coney Island's are the hardest to score on. It takes 20,000 before you get a free go, and those who score it are few. Pierrot had got 40,000 with ease; and once, in the presence of Paradis, had even scored 67,000, which had been their original point of contact.

"A fluke," Pierrot said modestly.

"We'll have a shot together," said Petit Pouce; "I fiddle about with the machines a bit meself."

"You might as well toss your hand in now," said Paradis, who had a high opinion of Pierrot: without, however, extending his admiration beyond the domain of pin-tables, where, 'tis true, the other excelled. Their friendship being in any case only eight days old, he had not yet had the time, nor taken the trouble, to investigate other aspects of his new pal's personality.

Up in the Chair-o-Planes, a solitary individual, securely strapped in, swung out and round about at a cost of three francs per quarter-hour. The Scenic Railway train ground up a gradient, but with empty carriages behind. The roundabouts were still static, the Dance Pavilion was deserted, and the fortune-tellers had nothing to foretell.

"Not many people about," said Pierrot to change the conversation, fearing that Paradis's praise of him might get in Petit Pouce's hair, and cause him to decide that he (Petit Pouce) couldn't stand him (Pierrot) any longer, no, not at any bloody price. For Pierrot, who had had a hard childhood, a miserable adolescence, and a pretty tough youth (which was still under way), and who knew, therefore, the way of the world, was now sure of one thing and one thing only: that sooner or later sparks would fly between Petit Pouce and himself, unless it happened to be with Paradis instead, one never knows.

"You wait till we get on them machines," replied Petit Pouce, who had a one-track mind and, moreover, liked competition.

He'd have continued to argue the toss on this subject (that of pin-tables in general and Coney Island's in particular) had not a couple of skirts, arm in arm and on the hunt, passed at that moment right under his nose.

"One on the left's not bad," he said with authority. "Make a nice ride."

"Well, ladies," shouted Paradis, "how about coming in for a bit of fun?"

"Roll up, ladies, roll up, ladies," Petit Pouce bawled, "roll up, roll up."

The girls did a half-turn and passed again before the Palace, even closer than before.

"Why don't you step in, ladies?" said Petit Pouce. "Split your sides laughing in here, honest you do."

"Yes, I'll bet," one said.

"With not a soul inside," added the other.

"That's just it," cried Paradis, "we were waiting for you."

"Don't strain yourself," they said. "Sure it hasn't given you a headache, thinking that one out all on your own?"

"They're taking the mike proper," said Petit Pouce.

The whole five of them burst out laughing, including Paradis. Seeing and hearing this, the passers-by began to become interested in the Palace of Laughter. Mme Tortose, sensing that harvest-time was near, put aside her knitting and got ready the tickets. With the two little bits of skirt as bait, the Peeping Toms, philosophers they called 'em in the trade, were bound to roam up, and the suckers would go through the whole bag of tricks in order to sit down

afterwards and laugh at the rest. Already a queue was forming up, any number of stooges ready to fork out a franc apiece in the anticipation of seeing up some female's skirt.

"How about having it on the house?" Petit Pouce said to the girls.

That'd break the ice, it'd encourage the peepers and the philosophers, and, once launched, the evening'd never look back until midnight struck, the sum total of all this being some nice fat takings for Monsieur bloody Tortose and a shirt wringing with sweat for each of his three employees. But the two bits of fluff, not so dumb, thought even a go on the house was too dear for them.

"Thanks a lot," said one, "you'd have to pay us to go in, a lousy dump like that."

"Roll up, lays and gents," Petit Pouce was bawling to the hangers-back, "roll up, folks, you'll miss the start."

"Better get on the job," Paradis told Pierrot, who promptly obeyed.

And the two little tarts were let drop.

Now trade was roaring and humming in the Amusement Park: thick tentacles of people, male and female, pushed out towards the entertainments offered to them at a relatively mounting tariff: two-three francs to be exact, at most. Opposite the Palace of Laughter, the Chair-o-Planes swung out, tethered to a high tower by their steel cables, and in front of the Palace itself great was the agitation.

People seemed quite ready all of a sudden to follow the instructions of Petit Pouce and take their tickets. Those who liked to be put through it paid a franc apiece, while the philosophers forked out triple that sum, impatiently

jostling each other to get seats near the front. Pierrot put on his glasses and waited at his appointed place. Already excited laughter was ringing out.

The first clients of both sexes appeared at the top of an escalator, dazzled by the arc-lamps and dumbfounded to be thus delivered without warning, the men to the malevolence of the public gaze, the women to its salacity. Shaken from the escalator by the force of circumstance, they saw themselves obliged in consequence to slide on their backs the length of a carefully greased chute. The philosophers snapped the scene with their camera eyes, each straining his visual capacity to its utmost sharpness, clarity and photographic precision. But this was not really a presage of things to come, any more than swallows, flying low, foretell rain. After all, a similar spectacle, reduced to its basic principals in daily life, is merely mundane: a slip on a Tube platform, a fall from a bus, a somersault on a slippery floor. It did not, even, contain the germ of the specific emotion sought by the peepers in return for their three francs' entrance fee to the Palace of Laughter.

Nevertheless, the regulars followed with calculated malice the misfortunes of the amateurs: staircases whose steps suddenly flattened out, planks which shot up in the air or curved into bows, carpets which moved in both directions at once, floorboards which shook like a quicksand. Etcetera, etcetera. Then came a corridor, called the Cake Walk, where various mechanical gadgets combined to impede any possible progress. It was Pierrot's job to get people out of this bottle-neck. A helping hand sufficed for the men, but when a woman approached, intimidated by this difficult crossing, Pierrot gripped her by the wrists,

jerked her towards him, and finally swung her into a gust of wind which blew up through a grating, causing her skirts to billow out : to the delight of the philosophers, providing that sufficient was thus revealed. This rapid prelude, after a sort of maze imposed on the victim's patience, brought them to the end of the tunnel. Meanwhile the philosophers shot out their necks convulsively, licking their lips over the tastier bits and pieces, lamping them with bulging eyes and enflamed pupils. After the maze, the suckers found themselves face to face with a revolving platform on which they were obliged to launch themselves as a fitting climax to all the fun they had bought with their hard-earned cash. Some came out of it well : they weren't interesting. Others staggered about off balance, rotated violently, tripped up, whirled about and tied themselves into knots, to the enormous delight of those who, having passed through this test, now swelled the ranks of the philosophers. These, however, were less interested in the stupid contortions of the stooges than in the disarray of women's clothing, and, ship ahoy, here one came sailing into the tunnel towards the Cake Walk, on which she seemed likely to founder. Petit Pouce seized her by the arm and, half lifting her, carried her across into the gust of wind which, blowing up her dress, disclosed her legs and undies. The philosophers clapped thunderously, while other, more innocent, bystanders were content to snigger at the lady's mishap. Another woman, following on, saw the said mishap and wished to avoid a similar experience ; she refused the helping hand of Petit Pouce, who had swung round in search of more victims, but he grabbed hold of her. Roars of acclamation were hushed to a sudden

silence as he put her down according to plan and held her there even longer than the previous one, to appease the peepers' wrath, aroused by her attempted refusal. A third, behind, was hopefully awaited by the satyrs, since the draught in the tunnel had led them to anticipate the scantiest possible underwear.

"Do your stuff!" a connoisseur shouted out to Petit Pouce, while Paradis moved the public on so's one could get a good close-up from the front.

Petit Pouce pulled it off: an absolute triumph! It was not easy to guess whether the lady was offended or whether she came there especially to exhibit her charms. Three or four others followed, but much less interesting, and this brought the first performance to a close. The hoi-polloi kicked the dust off their feet, but the devotees remained. Paradis went round collecting the money. Petit Pouce pocketed several large tips launched him to make sure he took good care of the prettiest girls. Pierrot wiped the sweat off his brow: it was hard work: especially as there were several palones who weighed their full measure of sex-appeal. And out of all this he, Pierrot, got nothing at all, for not only was he too busy with his work, but his restricted field of vision prevented him from taking full pleasure in the beauties unveiled by the gust of wind.

Meanwhile, Petit Pouce and Paradis, hollering outside, had got together a new group of would-be funsters, and a fresh performance began. The philosophers, some of whom had a passion for crossword puzzles, folded their papers, and settled down comfortably in their seats to get a good eyeful. And Petit Pouce and Pierrot, at their respective stations, once more handled without delicacy ladies

who struggled and kicked, humiliated and cheered on by the public. Pierrot began to get his hand in and to perform his duties almost mechanically. This way, blondie, and he thought of his father, now dead, not a bad bloke, who tumbled but was a good drunk, and who materialised as a rule with the noonday soup, the steam from which seemed to condense, like ectoplasm, into human shape. Now for the big brunette, and he thought of his mother, also dead, who'd tanned him so often he still felt black and blue all over. Another blondie, another brunette, then an old woman, then a little girl, and he went on thinking of those far-off days, of which nothing remained at this distance but bits and pieces; perhaps it was because of his new job which might herald, who knows, the start of a new life, that these fragmentary memories fluttered into his mind like pale delicate butterflies.

Now for a red-head, and he thought it was no fun to have had a childhood like his, it goes bad on one, and the nice bits where there might have been some hope are infected forever by the rest.

"Here, you, take your hands off!"

The butterflies took wing and flew away in front of Pierrot's eyes, he found facing him in their stead a tough-looking customer who was plainly a ponce. Despite his imminent danger, his professional conscience was still active. He tried to catch hold of the demoiselle, despite the warning already issued by her-kind-of-man. She resisted him, the philosophers started to hiss. Pierrot fought and won: the whore had to follow his lead. Applause rang out, prematurely, as it happened: a disappointment was in store. The kept man, rushing after his source of income,

seized hold of her skirt with both hands and pulled it down, combating the effect of the draught.

An indignant and unanimous clamour burst out.

“Cowson!” roared one of the philosophers.

“Cowson! Cowson!” others took up the refrain.

“They won’t even let one have a bit of sport nowadays,” a highly respectable gentleman remarked.

Behind the moralist and his steady came another couple out of the same stable. The second immoral earner naturally followed his buttie’s example. The philosophers, twice baulked of their pleasure, began to growl; the two fancy-boys went on their way with shouts of defiance, and the epithets, flung back and forth, gained both in vigour and in obscenity. The principal functions of the human body were invoked by both parties, also various organs situated between the waist and kneec. Appropriate gestures lent force to words whose impact had been weakened by over-use. When the foursome reached the tunnel, there was another hold-up. The pair of ponces refused to deliver their bed-mates into the hands of Paradis. An argument started up, while the platform whirled on its axis and the expectant satyrs howled their condemnation of a prudery that seemed to them out of place, especially, coming as it did, from such a dubious quarter.

“Twatts! you twatts!” they shouted.

Paradis finally remembered the boss’s injunction: don’t have no trouble. He pulled a lever, the platform stopped, and the gallants, followed by their ladies-in-waiting, passed through with yells of derision. These insults were too much for one of the philosophers. Exasperated at seeing the pleasure for which he had paid snatched from

under his nose, he rose from his seat, jumped over the platform and joined battle. His fist landed in the eye of one of the types, but this latter's chum struck back without hesitation, and thickened the aggressor's ear with a punch promptly and scientifically delivered. Whereupon the philosopher, maddened with pain, flung himself on both his adversaries and the three of them rolled together on the ground. Paradis and Petit Pouce tried to pull them apart, but other philosophers, taking their cue from the example of their comrade, threw themselves into the breach, pushed past the two employees, and started with clan for the struggling group on the ground. Upon which some shady characters, their sympathies aroused by the plight of their colleagues, came to the rescue and fell upon the philosophers with arms both short and long. A policeman who wished to intervene was hurled some distance away by the centrifugal force of the fight. Petit Pouce was sponging his nose, Paradis was feeling his ribs tenderly, the crowd on its feet was howling mingled encouragement and anger.

Pierrot, who had not budged, saw what was going on through the mist of his short sight, aggravated by the dust raised in the struggle, and, since nobody was taking any notice of him, put on his glasses again. Having examined the situation from all sides, it seemed plain to him that his presence was required and, leaping forward over the obstacles in his path, he plunged into the seething mass. First of all his specs. were ejected by the combatants, then he himself, with a black eye. He picked up his glasses, of which only one was cracked, and sat down again in a corner. He felt he had done all he could. The three employees now watched the struggle with dispassionate interest. And

if a broken tooth or a bit of someone's nose, bitten off and spat out, rolled at their feet, they were content to flip it out of the way, wiping off afterwards any blood that might have got on their hands.

But Monsieur Tortose, appearing on the scene, called in the police, and soon truncheons crack'd on skulls with a satisfactory resonance. The prestige of the police (especially their prestige), dissipated the confusion as an exorcist might dispose of a devil, and the booth was energetically emptied, leaving behind nothing but the torn stuffing of its seats and the dust trampled into its floor. The boss, advised by competent authority that his show would remain closed for the rest of the evening, entered, surveyed stuffing and dust, footmarks and tunnel, sniffed and slowly approached his three employees, who were dusting down their clothes and trying to achieve a more presentable appearance.

"Yellow lot of bastards!" he murmured. "Yellow lot of bastards," he articulated hollowly. "YELLOW LOT OF BASTARDS!" he thundered.

They stood before him in silence.

"Yellow lot of bastards!" he roared out once again.

"Ah, guv'nor, you ought to've seen that," said Paradis heartily. "Up comes this great big ponce: 'You want to get awkward?' he says. And wham! just like that, I give him one in each eye, and bang! a left in the belly, that settled him, out he goes like a light, not even a murmur."

"Don't try to come the old bag," said M. Tortose; "You behaved like sloppy yellow cowardly punks. Go on, get out, the whole bleeding lot of you!"

"Ah, nark it, guv'nor," said Paradis, "be reasonable ;

trouble like that doesn't start up every day. We were doing fine till this happened. The peepers were getting a proper eyeful."

"That's damn all to do with it," said M. Tortose.

"I could hear 'em saying," continued Paradis, "I could hear 'em talking among their selves, those geezers know their stuff, they said, they give us our real money's worth, we're having some right bloody fun. That's what they said, straight up. And they added, we'll come here again every night."

"Too true, boss," said Petit Pouce, "I heard 'em myself, that's what they said all right."

"You can see they're not bad fellows," said Mme Tortose, who had finished cashing up and had now joined her husband, "don't throw them out of a job because of those ignorant beasts, they had nothing to do with it."

"Oh, thank you, Ma'ame Tortose," said Paradis.

"All right, all right," said M. Tortose, "come in tomorrow."

"We closing?" Petit Pouce asked him.

"Yeah. You can go and kip down after if you want to."

"Righto, boss, we'll shut up shop and go for a turn round."

They shut up shop and went for a turn round.

They didn't go far; that is, they didn't leave the Amusement Park, over which, on this fine blue Sunday in June, the crowd seethed in a black and howling mass, spangled with light and music by more than twenty sideshows. Here one spins round quickly and there one drops from a height, here one bumps into things and there one is bumped

into, everywhere one shakes one's liver up and one's laughter out, one pinches a thigh or feels a breast, one tries one's skill, one tries one's strength, one roars with mirth, one lets oneself go : all barriers down, one bites the dust.

Pierrot, Petit Pouce and Paradis leaned against the rail and surveyed the situation on the Dodgems Track. As usual, there were several couples (not interesting), men on their own, and women similarly placed. The point of the game was for the men on their own to bump into the women on their own. A few young men, still in the flower of their innocence, took a pride in avoiding collisions, contenting themselves with describing geometrical figures and the joys of pure mathematics. In this way they made up for not having a car of their own. As for the women, they could be two in the same vehicle and still be alone, except for certain cases sapphically inclined. Petit Pouce and Paradis, having shaken the mitts of various colleagues whose work consisted of jumping from car to car to make the customers cough up ; Petit Pouce and Paradis recognized in one of these female couples the two little bits of stuff who had started the evening with them at the Palace. They waited patiently until the girls were propelled within hearing distance, and then sang out to them incontinently. The two bits fought shy of these advances to begin with, and continued their peregrinations ; but when a traffic jam brought them face to face with their admirers they deigned to smile.

As soon as the bell rang Petit Pouce and Paradis leaped the rail and threw themselves into an automobile, and directly the second bell sounded the resumption of hostili-

ties they got on the track of the two kids to put them through the mill, and then some. Having thus been amply introduced, a general post, at the next halt, regrouped them into two heterosexual couples. Petit Pouce chose the curly brunette, and Paradis the colourless one. And off they went again! Pierrot did not choose anyone.

Leaning back at his ease on the rail he thought of the death of Louis XVI, that's to say, he thought of nothing in particular; a light and luminous haze, like that which rises on a fine winter morning, clouded his mind. The buffers banged together heartily, the trolleys struck sparks from the metallic net above, women screamed; and from beyond, over the whole of the Amusement Park, came the dim muted roar of a crowd amusing itself and the raucous clamour of the charlatans and cheapjacks whose job was to amuse it. Pierrot held no real opinion on public morality or the future of civilization; no one had ever told him he was clever; people had, rather, been more prone to say that he behaved like a b.f. or that he had affinities with the moon. Anyhow here and now he was happy and vaguely at peace; he had a job, at anyrate for the season. In October he could have a look round; for the moment there was a whole three months before him, jingling already with the cash he'd earn. That was something to be happy about for one who'd had a rough time almost all his life: thin days, lean months and hungry years. His shiner was hurting him a bit, but why should physical pain be allowed to interfere with happiness?

As for Petit Pouce and Paradis, for them at the moment life was full of charm. One arm slipped round a succulent waist, the other nonchalantly manipulating the steering

gear of their dwarf-vehicles, they paid for their happiness at the rate of two francs per five minutes. Doubly their senses gave them pleasure, directly by the contact of a thigh or breast felt through a minimum of clothing, indirectly by the buffets they dished out or, more rarely, received. Their vanity was also assuaged, directly by bumping into more people than bumped into them, indirectly by thinking of Pierrot, whom they'd left out in the cold. The music also (an amplifier brayed out "You're lovely to look at") sent a sweet shiver down their spines; and, as has been already proved, one may quite easily not think of the death of Louis XVI and still go on existing with at least every appearance of humanity and the air of getting pleasure out of life. Nevertheless, during the halts Petit Pouce wasn't as happy as all that. For he was married, very legitimately. And he had a conscience. A very small one, but a conscience all the same. That, however, did not prevent him, when he went out on his ownsome, from squeezing all the harder any young breast he could get his fingers on.

Pierrot turned away from his pals' taking it and handing it out. Before him the Babylonian structure of the Scenic Railway carried its load of passengers, which rattled by, sounds of female hysteria floating in its wake. On his right the philosophers, dispersed by the police, had come together again, staring up open-mouthed at the swings, and especially at a well-developed girl who seemed of an oncoming disposition. On Pierrot's left were the shooting-galleries, coconut shies and lotteries. This was the direction he took, vaguely thinking of knocking down four coconuts with one ball, or of taking a snap of himself by hitting the bull.

He drifted with the tide, sometimes left high and dry like a pebble thrown up on the beach, then drifting again as though lifted on the crest of a wave. Fishing for Goldfish, Aunt Sally, and the Sleeping Beauty didn't attract him, but the machine-gun gallery did. Oddly enough, the manipulation of this formidable weapon did not seem to interest anyone else.

Pierrot forked out a couple of francs and fired a burst.

"Not so hot," he said to the girl in charge of the stall.

He fared no better with his second shot, and remarked :

"Can't see properly out of this eye."

"D'you have a fight?" the girl asked him.

"It wasn't much of one. Down in the Palace of Laughter, little while back."

"Oh yes, I heard about it. What happened?"

He told her.

"Isn't it silly?" she said.

"You're not doing much business," remarked Pierrot, feeling he could now talk shop as he'd given away that he was in the racket too.

"I've a lousy pitch. They stop at the Aunt Sallies first and then shoot off into the Sleeping Beauty, leaving me flat. It's these peep shows that fetch 'em. You're a sportsman, at anyrate: I can see that."

Pierrot looked at her.

"I'd come here if only for you."

"Now now."

"Straight up I would. Anyhow I'll bet there's lots of blokes try to date you up under cover of firing the what'sit."

"True enough. God, are they boring. No getting shut of 'em. And dumb . . . you can't imagine how dumb."

"I can."

"Think they're smart, and the crack: they make . . . sometimes I could scream?"

"You don't have to tell me," Pierrot said.

"Now you, you don't seem like that."

"Probably not, it's just the way I am."

"Yes, I can see you're different. Instance, you haven't tried to make a date yet."

"What time d'you get off?" Pierrot asked her.

"It's not so easy," said the palone. "Dad's always on the watch. Then there's my stepmother, well, they never really got hitched up, but she's always following me around too. Tell me about yourself."

"I'm just a lonely orphan," Pierrot told her.

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"No."

"You must be awfully lonely."

"I get by. Course, sometimes I feel it a bit, but not more than anyone else."

"I could get on fine without *my* relations."

"Suppose we meet again soon, what d'you say ? Tomorrow?" Pierrot had turned and was glancing behind him.

"What're you looking at?" the girl demanded. "That old cow?"

"Me? No. I was looking to see if my mates were still on the Dodgems."

"Like to treat me to a ride?"

"When?"

“Right away. I’ll shut up shop.”

She shrouded the machine-gun in a typewriter hood, padlocked the ammo in a wooden box and tipped the contents of the till into her handbag.

“Let’s go.”

Three would-be wide boys swaggered up, trying to look as though they wanted trouble.

“Not so fast, blondie,” said the widest of them. “Un-wrap that typewriter so’s I can write my name on your target.”

His henchmen thought this a wonderful crack. They both burst out laughing, and one let a fart, for good measure.

“Come back some other time,” the probable girl-friend of Pierrot told them, “I’m closing now.”

“What you mean, closing? At this time?”

“You heard.”

The tough guys were undecided. Pierrot took off his glasses.

“Oh let ’em be,” she told him, “they’re only full of wind.”

The smarties stood there as though stuffed. The widest boy, the spokesman, looked at Pierrot’s shiner uncertainly. Sign of a fighting spirit, or of easy defeat? He couldn’t make up his mind, and shoved aside suddenly by the girl, he in any case had no option but to stare, on the one hand, at two expressive backs receding from him with dignity and contempt, and on the other at a machine-gun hooded in black linoleum and tied up like a parcel. So he mooched off sadly with his two men.

Pierrot was not sorry to avoid another spot of bother, not that he was yellow, but fighting just wasn’t his idea of

fun. The girl had taken him by the arm. She felt warm and supple beside him. She had on scent, she painted her nails, her mouth was smeared with lipstick. Pierrot inhaled these mingled perfumes with admiration. He thought she was a pretty hot number. She was nearly as tall as himself, blonde or almost, with the hollow face of a consumptive starlet, and elsewhere the reverse of hollow. Pierrot put on his specs as they approached the Dodgem Track.

Crammed into one of these small vehicles, in no time they were off. The first car Pierrot bumped out of his way contained another couple equally squashed together. The man, who thought himself dodgy, turned threateningly to see who had treated him with such disrespect. This man was named Petit Poucc. He was short, stocky, tough, aged forty-five, married but a chaser, came from Bezons, had the vote, wasn't so dumb ; in fact, a parishioner with his nut screwed on tight. So imagine his embarrassment, this same Petit Pouce, when he spotted Pierrot with a smashing lump of stuff crammed in the car next to him. Dumbfounded, he let himself be crashed into by Paradis who, seeing Pierrot at the same moment, let his chariot get out of control altogether, which led to quite a nice general traffic jam in their neighbourhood.

Pierrot, however, went on his way undisturbed, describing elegant parabolas and figure-eights, while his sweet bride pressed herself against him. Both of them were quite happy, in the midst of an infernal racket. Of the various odours which tickled his nostrils, rubber, canvas, varnish and dust, to name only a few, Pierrot retained only the exotic aroma disseminated by the bramah. This evocative

perfume immersed him in a luminous fog, pricked with scented stars.

But through this fog he became gradually aware of two shapes, growing ever more distinct, who seemed to be taking a lot of interest in him. One shape was female, still young, chromium-blond, heavily made-up, tall and stout. The woman was pointing at him, at Pierrot. He asked himself if it could really be he who was being denounced with such vehemence. No doubt about it, it was he all right. Yet he didn't know this lady, never set eyes on her before. She seemed to be sneering triumphantly at him. All sorts of expressions passed swiftly across her features. The fog had melted away ; Pierrot could see her plainly now. As for the bloke, he had a very odd dial indeed. The upper part was quite well drawn, but from the nose down it was a complete wash-out. The cheeks had dropped into the chin, unevenly. One nostril was larger than the other. As for his ears, they'd have done for wings.

A bell rang and the cars stopped. Pierrot was about to suggest another round when it became obvious to him that the blonde bag was out for trouble. Already the geezer with her had climbed onto the track and was making straight for him.

"What the hell are you up to?" he shouted. "What about your stall, eh? The bloody machine-gun."

Realizing that these remarks could only be addressed to his new-found girl-friend, Pierrot turned in time to see her, already in full flight. The crowd was holding its sides, so pregnant with humour did it find the situation. Paradis and Petit Pouce had tears in their eyes, it was a right proper lark.

The girl having done a bunk, the angry man turned on her bespectacled beau, who by now was climbing out of the car.

"You," he said, "you, get the hell o... Think because you pay three francs at the gate that it gives you the right to get off with the employees. Eh ? "

"I don't think anything of the sort," said Pierrot, "and anyway I didn't pay three francs to come in."

He liked to make things clear.

"Half-price, eh ? " said the big man. "How come ? You're not a bloody child."

"No," Pierrot admitted, "I got in free."

"That's the bleeding limit," roared the giant.

He called on the public to join him in condemning this outrage.

"You're not having me on by any chance ? "

"No, I only meant I work here."

"You ? Work here ? Since when ? "

"Today."

What could have been truer ? Yet the inquisitor, flinging his arms wide, addressed all present in the following words, heavy with irony :

"He thinks he has me foxed, the little twatt."

Then in a harsher tone :

"The little twatt thinks he has me foxed."

And even more harshly :

"But I'm *still* going to knock his little block off."

As these words were addressed to the public, he had his back half-turned to Pierrot, who thought it prudent to take the initiative at this point and thus get the better of the situation. With an unexpected kick, he launched his little

car at the legs of the large man who menaced him. He hoped in this way to trip up his antagonist and then take to his heels. This was the logical solution he had chosen to the ever-recurrent problem of the weak and the strong.

The plan worked to a T. The vehicle tripped up the tough as expected; his peroration abruptly cut short, he fell backwards with his feet in the air and landed in this position at the steering wheel of the car itself, which pursued its course for several yards laden with its involuntary passenger.

A clamour arose from the crowd at this latest development, which seemed especially designed for their delectation. And Pierrot, instead of taking flight as he had intended, stayed where he was, following with absorption the result of his manœuvre. Which allowed a new adversary to catch up with him : M. Tortose.

“ You ! ” he hissed. “ Starting trouble again ! ”

Then he realized that Pierrot’s victim, now struggling up from his undignified position, was none other than Eusèbe Pradonet—M. Pradonet himself—the boss, the owner of the Amusement Park.

“ Crikey ! ” he moaned.

And to Pierrot :

“ As for you, take my advice : beat it. Get out at once and don’t—come—back. Not tomorrow or any other day. Go on : scarper ! ”

“ What about my wages, Monsieur Tortose ? ”

Pradonet was busy dusting down his suit. M. Tortose, not a bad bleeder at heart, passed a few bank notes to Pierrot, who, taking his advice, soon found himself alone and in the darkness outside the garishly-lit entrance of the Amusement Park. He was out of a job again.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't take on, cock," said Paradis ; " come and have a drink, we'll fix it up, don't worry."

But they couldn't fix it up. Next day, despite the entreaties of Paradis and even those of Petit Pouce, Tortose, fearing the wrath of Pradonet, still refused to re-engage Pierrot.

2

IT WAS Pradonet's custom, and had been for many years, to shave between five and six p.m., in order to look fresh during dinner and throughout the evening. When he had guests, he took even more trouble with his appearance.

This evening he'd invited to dinner the famous fakir, Crouia Bey, who for the next fortnight was destined to occupy the sideshow recently occupied by the Gorilla Man, and before that, in the order named, by the 'Two-headed Woman, the Double-necked Giant, the Magic Crystal-gazer, and many others.

While he was busy scraping the stubble from his cheeks, Leonie, his mistress—known as Mme Pradonet, though in reality but the widow of one Prouillot—this Leonie was squeezing herself into a sort of armour-plating, not that she was really fat, but after all she wasn't far off it, and is it not the duty of every woman to make the most of herself?

By the means previously described, she therefore restricted her middle-aged spread, and, exhausted by the effort, plumped down on the bed and pensively examined the face of her lord and master, which she could see reflected in the mirror, one cheek puffed out to get nearer the razor. Then the reflected face, stripped simultaneously of lather and

stubble, shone out suddenly like an advertisement for Gillette blades.

"What're you so happy about?" asked Leonie.

Pradonet blew out his cheeks and gave a roar of laughter.

"Don't be funny," said Leonie.

He went on laughing. She shrugged her shoulders and started to pull on her stockings.

"D'you know what I was thinking of?" asked Pradonet, who'd now ceased to laugh.

"Couldn't care less."

"I was thinking of myself falling arse over tip into one of those bloody silly little cars. Ha! ha! ha!"

"I always thought you were a b.f.," said Leonie. "Where's your dignity? If you hadn't got me you'd have been a sucker for anyone who came along. You'd never have owned an amusement park, not on your life. Who's got the most money in the business? Me, eh? To please you I let you think you're important, but without me where'd you be? You wouldn't even be able to punch the tickets at the gate, much less anything else. You're a born sucker, that's what you are. Slap you on the chops, and damn me if you wouldn't hold out the other cheek."

"Ah, turn it up Leonie, you go too far. Anyway, I fell for it proper. The cunning little twitt! Ha! ha! ha!"

"You kicked him out, I hope?"

"Course, don't worry. Poor little chap."

"Who signed him on? Tortose?"

"He worked in the Palace of Laughter."

"I know that. I'm asking you, who signed him on?"

"Tortose did."

"He knows how to pick 'em, too. Christ, if it wasn't for me, what a mess-up there'd be."

They finished dressing. A ring at the doorbell.

"That'll be the fakir," said Leonie. "God, he's early. I'll bet he hasn't eaten all day so's to stuff himself at our expense. Let him wait, it'll do him good."

"He's pretty hot, you know."

"I wouldn't have engaged him otherwise."

"Ah, draw it mild. Who engaged him, you or me, tell me that?"

"I'll tell you what I please. And anyhow you'd have given his own terms if I hadn't put my foot down firmly. Fakirs are corny anyway. I only put up with him because I couldn't find anyone else and because he's cheap. Otherwise . . ."

"You ought to see him stick pins in himself. Bloody good show. Gives me a lift."

"Phooey, all that caper's out of date. He'll only last a couple of weeks, until we can find somebody to take over from him."

"I'll go and see him, if no one else does. I like that sort of thing."

"You great big silly," said Leonie, falling into the arms of Pradonet. She murmured endearments into his ear.

A knock came at the door. The maid appeared and asked if they were going in to dinner, or it'd all be burned, and if they didn't hurry the guest would've drunk everything in the house, although he said the liquor was bad, far's she'd heard.

"Coming now," said Leonie.

She detached herself from Pradonet with the sucking noise made by a rubber dart when one pulls it off the target.

"Now what're you grinning at?" she asked.

"Last night. Must've been dead funny to see me rolling arse over tip. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Soppy fool," said Leonie, affectionately.

They got going and a few moments later entered the drawing-room. With one glance Leonie took in the amount already drunk by Crouia Bey. This latter hurled himself instantly upon her hand.

"How are you, dear lady?" he murmured.

Velvet eyes, the brow of a sage, the hands of a pianist, the beard of the Prophet, a wasp-waist, coral lips, neck like a bull, tall, dark and handsome: he hit Leonie right in the eye.

Pradonet and he pumphandled each other heartily.

Yvonne, Pradonet's daughter, entered. She was introduced to the fakir.

"Dinner's served," said the maid.

They sat round the dining-room table, round the lobster mayonnaise which provided them for a time with a subject of conversation. Then came the roast lamb stuffed with garlic, which made everyone think of the wind they'd pass in the night, but, manners! not a word; they were not ignorant, thank Heaven; they knew how to behave at table. Pradonet surveyed with admiration his guest's prowess. Could he put it away! What a trencherman! Leonie must've been right, he couldn't have eaten for days. But Leonie herself had forgotten her prediction. Out of the corner of her eye she was watching the fakir fixedly.

By Christ, what a good-looker, knew his onions all right, you could see. Leonie began to like him. She felt she wanted to take him down a peg or two. Yvonne took no notice, she'd other things to think about ; she'd a new lover—boy called Perdrix who worked at the Bridge of Sighs. She'd given herself to him last night in a cardboard gondola, in a Venice made of papier-mâché. It rocked terribly, they nearly fell overboard into the dusty sordid water. But they were young, they thought it was marvellous. Anyhow she'd something more to think about than the dinner, the fakir and so on.

"I'll bet," said Leonie, "I'll bet you know Halem Bey."

Halem Bey was a fakir of renown, born in Rueil, real name Victor. Pretty well-known in Paris.

"I?" cried Crouia Bey. "Never on your life, dear lady. Halem Bey? A charlatan, an absolute charlatan. I never have anything to do with people like that. Real mystics are an entirely different matter."

"Real mystics? Where d'you find 'em?" asked Leonie.

"You've only to look at me, for one."

"And where d'you come from, Monsieur Crouia Bey?"

"From Tartaouine, near Tunis," answered the fakir, cutting a huge slab out of a cliff of Gorgonzola. "Ah, Tartaouine, tat agimena fica larbiya chouia chouia barka, excuse me: home-sickness, you know. Nostalgia for the desert—the desert with its dromedaries—er—you know, camels, like this."

He got up and pranced round the table, imitating a camel.

Eusèbe and Leonie fell back in their chairs, their jaws almost dislocated with laughter.

"Smashing!" said Pradonet, wiping his eyes.

"Joke over," said Leonie, wiping hers. "I'll bet you come from up north. I can tell by the way you talk."

"No, no, dear lady," answered the fakir, "I'm a genuine Arab, honestly. Listen!"

He imitated the muezzin summoning the faithful to prayer.

"You've got it," said Pradonet. "Bloody good."

"I know," exclaimed Leonie, "you wouldn't be the brother of Jojo Mouillemine, who used to sing on the halls under the name of Chaliaque?"

"Shut up and don't be rude," said Pradonet, seeing the face of the fakir gradually fall. "And you," he added to Yvonne, "time you were off to work."

Without saying a word Yvonne rose from her seat.

"Mademoiselle's leaving us already?" said the fakir gallantly.

"Let her alone," said Pradonet good-humouredly, "she's got to get off to her job. Wish mine was as easy. Ha! ha! ha!"

Yvonne went out.

"She runs the machine-gun gallery. Good for her to have something to do, course till she gets married. Damned if I'll keep her lounging about doing nothing. Not that I couldn't afford to, if I didn't think everybody ought to have a job."

"I should imagine you do pretty well," said the fakir.

"Put it like this, I'm not scared of the sack, since I'm my own boss!"

"Nobody asked you to give an account of yourself," said Leonie.

“ Ah, shut up, I’m not giving away any secrets. Everybody knows I own the whole ruddy caboosh, even he’s guessed that.”

And to the fakir :

“ D’you tell fortunes ? ”

“ No, you know as well as I do that telling fortunes is only spoof.”

“ My husband doesn’t know everything,” Leonie told him, “ he’s not God.”

Crouia Bey continued : “ I only go in for the real stuff, knives, hatpins, boards with nails, broken glass and live coals. There’s no nonsense about me.”

“ Stone a crow ! ” said Pradonet with conviction.

But Leonie was determined to corner the fakir.

“ You sure,” she asked, “ that you’re not Jojo’s brother ? I remember he used to tell me his brother stayed on out in Africa when he’d done his military service there. He’d had all sorts of jobs, then one day he saw his vocation, he wanted to become a fakir. It wouldn’t be you, by any chance ? ”

“ Shut up, for Christ’s sake,” said Pradonet. “ He’ll think he’s being third-degreed ”

“ Never mind, never mind,” said Crouia Bey. “ I can see the dear lady’s only trying to tease me. Of course I don’t know this Jojo Whateverhisnameis.”

He emptied his coffee-cup at a gulp, though its contents were boiling hot, and put it carefully back in its saucer. Leonie watched him twirling his moustache meditatively, hesitating, evidently, between the lie direct and partial confession.

“ How about a cigar ? ” Pradonet suggested.

The other accepted, piercing the end with precision and dignity, and took a light from the lighter proffered by his host.

"All right," he said, "all right, all right, it's quite all right, an odd coincidence all the same."

"Then I *was* right?" asked Leonie.

"You hit the spot," answered Mouilleminche; "my name's Bob and my kid brother was certainly the singer. So you knew him, eh? Well, well, the world's a small place, it's only mountains that don't knock up against each other. How d'you come to know him?"

"He was my first boy-friend," said Leonie.

"That doesn't surprise me," said Mouilleminche, "he was always running after women."

"What're you getting at?" asked Leonie.

"Well, you can't tell me he was a steady fellow," said the brother; "proof is, that's how he got his."

"Is he dead?" cried Leonie.

Mouilleminche hesitated: it was quite evident that he was dead.

"My first love," moaned Leonie, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Pradonet jumped up to console her, but she waved him aside.

"Bloody clever, shooting your mouth off like that," said Pradonet to the fakir. "Anyone can see you're no fortune-teller."

"Let him alone, let him alone," murmured Leonie. "I want to know how it happened."

"Righto, I'll tell you," said Mouilleminche, "only 'tis no use piping your eye, it's just the way things are, see? Everybody's got to die some time. Look, I'm not shedding

any tears over him, and I'm his brother. Course, I've had time to get used to it—his death, I mean."

"Go on, spill your story," said Pradonet, "you can see she's aching to hear it."

But Leonie had by this time almost recovered.

"You must think I'm terribly silly," she said to the fakir, dabbing at her eyes, "getting in this state over a chap one knew at seventeen and who gave one the go-by at seventeen and a half. Course, he was the first, you understand? Well, well, so he's dead? I often wondered what'd become of him. I knew he was no longer on the halls, I thought maybe he was touring."

"He's dead all right," said the brother, "no more touring for him. Here's how it happened. He was going round the provinces, and he fell for the daughter of one of the local big-wigs. The big-wig had a great big house, grounds and so on, and a high wall running round it. And every night my brother used to climb the wall, run through the grounds and in at the window, where the girl was waiting for him. Mind you, she wasn't as green as she looked. Then one morning they found him all huddled up at the foot of the wall, mu- 've slipped climbing over. All the king's horses and all the king's men, if you see what I mean. That's how my brother died."

"Now there's a death for you," said Leonie with enthusiasm, "there's romance, there's passion for you, there's life. You'd never die like that, Pradonet, would you, my big fat frog?"

"Harrumph!" said Pradonet.

"What about the girl?" asked Leonie. "What became of her?"

" Damned if I know, I couldn't even tell you her name or address. Fact is, at that time I was in Cairo, Egypt, you know. My mother wrote to me about it, and when I got back to Europe she'd died in the meantime. So I'd no more family left, never having known my father."

" So you're an orphan ? " said Pradonet.

" Old Jojo, would you believe it," said Leonie pensively, " fancy him dying like that ! Well, we none of us get any younger. Ah, those were the days ; I was young, I didn't give a damn, and I sang all day long. 'Coz I was a singer too, comic songs they were. There I was with a hoola-hoola on, a straw skirt, you know, you've never seen anything like it. You ought've seen me kick my heels over my head. Men running after me all day long, they wouldn't leave me alone. Then one day my voice broke, so I got married. But I never forgot Jojo."

" You're getting sentimental," said Pradonet. " Search me if I could tell you who my first love was."

Crouia Bey raised his glass of brandy, and to change the conversation :

" Your very good health," said he.

" And yours," said Leonie and Pradonet.

They knocked the alcohol back and for some minutes smoked their cigars in silence : Leonie as well, for she sometimes dressed like a man and was addicted to strong tobacco.

" What d'you think of your new job ? " Pradonet asked the fakir.

" I've had better, but times are hard."

" Need any assistants ? "

" Only one. I've got a costume for him. Anybody'd do."

"And you can guarantee six performances between nine p.m. and midnight?"

"That's what I've already told you. I always keep my word."

"Of course," said Pradonet. "So, six times in an evening you'll bite off a bar of iron. White-hot?"

"Absolutely."

"I wonder who that girl was," said Leonie.

"No idea," said the fakir. "Can you get me a helper? I've nobody at all at the moment."

"There are plenty of mugs about," said Pradonet; "we could have a drink together tomorrow at the Universal, and see what we can find."

"Suits me," said the fakir.

"I must admit I've known more than one man," said Leonie, "but I've never forgotten Jojo, so you can understand I'd like to know who the girl was."

She doused the butt of her cigar in the dregs of her coffee-cup.

"What d'you know about that, Monsieur Mouilleminche?" she asked the fakir.

"I've never thought about it," said Crouia Bey, bored.

"If you'd allow me to say so, love," said Pradonet, "I think it's unhealthy curiosity on your part."

"Women always *are* curious. It's a weakness."

"Ah, the eternal feminine," gallantly sighed the fakir with his most charming smile. "Eve—Psyche—Pandora——"

"Who are all these women?" demanded Leonie. "More girl-friends of Jojo's?"

"Sweetheart," said Pradonet taking her hand tenderly.

They looked into one another's eyes. The fakir twirled his moustache, deep in thought.

"To work!" said Leonie, pulling her hand brusquely away from Pradonet's adulterous grasp.

She rose with decision. Crouia Bey rose at the same time, surprised and put out.

"Sit down, sit down," said Pradone. "there's no hurry for us, Leonie's got to be on the job on the dot of nine. But——"

"You can explain all that afterwards," said Leonie, "I've no time to waste. Sorry, Mouilleminche, but time's money, see? I hope we'll meet again and talk over old times, Jojo and all that. . . . Anyway—so long, 'Zebbi."

Fusèbe and his mistress went into a clinch without restraint, and the fakir plunged upon the hand extended to him, which was copiously jewelled. He nearly skinned his nose, which was long, on an obtrusive ten-carat diamond.

Leonie went out; the big boss offered another cigar, another round of brandy :

"Yes, that's the way she is. Every evening while the season lasts, soon as nine strikes, she goes and sits in the Scenic Railway pay-box, she can see all over the Park from there. Anything goes wrong, she gets up and deals with it. I ought to tell you the show's hers : her husband owned it when we became partners. D'you ever know her husband? Albert Prouillot? Used to be a conjuror once, broke all his fingers hitting a nigger on the jaw. And would you believe it, this nigger, who hailed from Martinique, name of Louis Durand, this nigger'd put up a little sideshow for sale, and as Prouillot couldn't go on with his job any longer, they teamed up and bought the Scenic Railway, brand new in those days. I'm talking of fifteen

years ago; course I've got it all up to date since then. Then Durand kicked the bucket, so when I started the Park, Prouillot became my partner. Mind you I don't say he was my only partner, cause to start up a thing like that you got to have capital; I'm only saying the Scenic belonged to Prouillot. Not boring you, am I?"

"Not at all."

"Well, this brother of yours, I never knew him. Why, in those days I didn't even know Leonie existed, true as I'm sitting here. I'd some Dobbies, you know, roundabouts for kids to ride on, some real wooden dobbie horses, came to me from my father, not worth much, I can tell you. Yes, I started right at the foot of the ladder but if you want to see what I am now, come with me."

He put down his brandy with the same rapidity shown by Leonie in getting rid of hers, and rose to his feet.

"We'll go up on the terrace," he continued, "I'll just show you."

The fakir regretfully lapped the last drops of brandy allowed him by his host.

"Excellent liqueur."

"Had a good dinner?" asked Pradonet heartily. "Good. Now I'm going to show you one of the best views you've ever seen."

He led his guest onto the balcony of the house that he'd had built on one of the four corners occupied by the Amusement Park. Pradonet, his daughter, and Mme Prouillot inhabited the two top floors; on the second floor lived the Tortoses, on the first M. and Mme Perdrix, on the ground floor the caretaker and various birds of passage who occupied rooms there from time to time.

“ Well, what d’you think of it ? ” asked Pradonet when they got there.

The Amusement Park was spread out below them, teeming and noisy. Music, crashes and cries rose together, hitting you right in the ear-drum. High above the myriad lights that glared and flashed, passenger planes, attached to a tall pylon, flew silently round in a romantic dusk. But below them the scene resembled an enormous cheese, crawling with black maggots, lit by glow-worms.

“ Yes,” said Pradonet, “ it’s all mine, nearly all anyway. Anyhow I run it, I organize it, I’m the boss. I won’t tell you my takings, but some days we get one hundred thousand visitors. Twenty stalls, not counting the lotteries, the games of skill, and the shooting-galleries, that’s them over there, between the Scenic Railway and the Dance Pavilion, near the side-gate, see ? But the main gate’s bang in front of us, and on the right as you go in, that is, on our left, you’ll see your own gaff. There, just in front of the Ghost Train, where all those people are going in.”

“ Yes, I see it,” said Crouia Bey.

“ And all that’s mine, all of it, or nearly all. And I got up from nothing. Just on a few dobbey-horses, real wooden dobbey-horses, my dear sir.”

“ And what’s that over by the side, where it isn’t lit up ? ”

“ Where d’you mean ? ”

“ Over there, in that side-street, looks like a little chapel and some trees——”

“ Oh, that ? That’s nothing, doesn’t belong to me. We’ll go back now if you like.”

“ I didn’t know you were an astronomer,” said the fakir, indicating a telescope mounted on a tripod.

“ Oh, that, that’s the way I survey the battlefield, my boy. Here, d’you want to see Leonie at the pay-box in the Scenic Railway ? ”

He swung the telescope round. The fakir put his eye to it.

“ Yes, there she is,” he said politely.

Pradonet looked through the telescope in his turn.

“ Good old Leonie,” he murmured, “ bang on the job. Looks sad tonight, though, that’s your fault or rather your brother’s,” he added, turning towards the fakir.

“ Well, she would talk about it. I didn’t want to.”

“ True enough. They’re funny things, women. Not like us men, we go straight for a thing, they’re always going round in circles. It’s their monthlies have a lot to do with it. Gets their minds all messed up, can’t tell me it doesn’t affect ’em. But I expect you know all about that, in your job you got to know about the human body.”

Pradonet swung the telescope in another direction.

“ D’you want to see my daughter ? ”

The fakir put his eye to the telescope.

“ Yes, there she is,” he said politely.

Pradonet looked through the telescope in his turn.

“ Would you believe it,” he said, “ left her stall flat yesterday to go on the Dodgems with some measly little twitt : God knows what she saw in him. I know she’s fair game, but all the same there are limits. One can’t leave one’s gaff to look after itself. Course I know she’s a cheap little hussy, it’s the way girls are nowadays, you can read about it in the papers every week.”

He sighed, and swung the telescope round once more.

“ Now,” he said, “ we’ll see how they’re doing at the gate.”

"Yes, let's," said the fakir, who by now had had his fill of Parkonomy.

Pradonet put his eye to the telescope.

"Yes, seems to be going all right. Hello——"

"Something wrong?" asked the fakir.

"Hello, hello, it's that twirp again."

Still crouched over the telescope, he turned towards Crouia Bey :

"Boy who got my girl away from her gaff yesterday. And then, I must tell you this, he tripped me up with one of the Dodgem cars and sent me arse over tip. If it'd happened to another bloke I'd have found it bloody funny. Worked at the Palace of Laughter, he did. Course, after that they kicked him out. And now he's bloody well got in again. Paid, too, I just saw him take his ticket. He's stopping before your advert."

He stuck his eye to the telescope again.

"Hell! he's gone."

He swung the telescope furiously round in all directions to catch up with Pierrot.

"Ah, got him! Down by the House of Horrors. No, he's not going in. The Dance Pavilion—no, he's not going in there either. Now he's going on. Exactly what I thought. Here he is at the Housey Housey stall, you'd think he was going to play, but he's only looking on. Hm, he's had enough of that, there he goes. Where's he heading for? The Sleeping Beauty, looks like. Old Prouillot thought that one up. You know it? There's a woman asleep on a bed, see? You pay a franc and shoot at the target, if you hit the bull the bed tips over and out falls the tart on the floor. Not a stitch, needless to say. Draws 'em, a show like that,

I can tell you. He was no fool, old Prouillot. But my chap hasn't gone in the Beauty. Not he, I should've known. By Christ, there he is chatting to her again. He must be loopy; what the hell can they find to talk about?"

"You don't mind me coming and talking to you?"
Pierrot was asking Yvonne.

"Not at all. Nice to see you again."

"You didn't get into trouble yesterday, I hope?"

"Just the usual rolluxing, that's all."

"So you're the big boss's daughter, they tell me?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's something, after all," said Pierrot.

"Get along with you, everybody's got to come from somewhere."

"But why are you working?"

"His Nibs. It's orders. Anyway, I don't mind. I meet a lot of people, quite an education in its way."

"You're a funny girl, you don't give a damn, do you?"

"You look pretty fed-up yourself."

"Well, it's not so funny, I'm out of a job. I'll have to gaff the chaff."

"Poor boy. It was rotten of him to sling you out."

"Oh, it doesn't matter, so long as you didn't get into trouble."

"I got over it."

"How's business tonight?"

"So so."

A group of urchins approached.

"Come on, don't be scared," said Pierrot, "it's only a couple of francs, and you're as good as in Chicago. Besides,

it's fine training for the next war. Don't hang back, get on that gun."

One of the small boys came up on his ownsome ; meanwhile Pierrot and Yvonne could talk.

"Your dad looks pretty fierce," said Pierrot.

"Oh, he's not so bad really. You've got to bawl when you're the boss."

"I suppose so. The dame with him, though, she looked pretty tough. What a face !"

"Well, after all, it's nothing to do with you."

"Course not. I was only talking."

"Let's talk about something more amusing."

"Sorry."

"It's quite all right."

The kid had fired his burst. Yvonne went to fetch the target.

"Not too bad, me boyo," said Pierrot, "have another shot."

The kid felt in his pocket, and soon the machine gun rattled out once more.

"Couldn't we meet somewhere else one of these days ?" Pierrot asked Yvonne.

"That'll be hard. I'm here all afternoon and all evening."

"And when you get off ?"

"I go home, thank you."

"The morning, then ?"

"We'll see."

"Where ?"

"Bit previous, aren't you ?"

"Then you won't ?"

"I told you, one morning maybe."

“ But where ? ”

“ I’m sometimes in the Rue des Larmes, about eleven. But don’t wait about for me. If you don’t see me there, it’s because I couldn’t make it.”

“ But where is the Rue des Larmes ? ”

“ The one running just behind here. From the Porte d’Argenteuil.”

“ You’ll be there tomorrow ? ”

“ Maybe.”

“ *I’ll* be there.”

The machine-gun magazine was empty. Yvonne went to fetch the target. Pierrot suddenly took wing: two thugs had seized him from behind and were dragging him to the gates so fast his heels didn’t touch the ground. And so suddenly that nobody noticed his disappearance. Near the pay-box two other baskets waited, who looked him over from top to toe. One said :

“ Will you know him again ? Yeah ? Well, he’s not to be let in, boss’s orders.”

Then all four projected him into the night.

“ Nice work,” said Pradonet, who had followed the scene through the telescope. “ You see how I did it ? Pick up the phone, and anyone causing trouble goes out on his neck. No fuss about it, either, we don’t give ’em time. That’s organization for you ! ”

“ Splendid,” said the fakir.

“ Poor devil,” added Pradonet, “ it’s just his ill luck. Still, the very idea, interfering with the employees in the performance of their duty. Yvonne’s got other things to do, no time to natter to him. He’s just unlucky, you can see that straightaway. Instance, he could quite easily have

got in tonight without being seen. But no, he has to go and get spotted. And by me, into the bargain ! D'you believe in bad luck, Mouillemiche ? You know all about that madam."

"It can be avoided, the same as everything else."

"What !" exclaimed Pradonet. "But suppose a flower-pot fell on your head. You can't tell me that——"

"Flower-pots don't fall on fakirs' heads."

Dreamily Pradonet swung the telescope back into place.

"But that bit that's not lit up," said Crouia Bey, "you haven't told me yet what it is."

"Yes, I have," answered Pradonet, annoyed, "I told you it was nothing. Nothing at all."

3

FOR THE last two years Pierrot had lived in the same hotel. It'd become a habit. Hotel de l'Aveyron, a lightly built structure with only one floor, and a balcony on the outside which formed a means of communication between the various rooms. The courtyard had once been a farmyard, the attic-window looked out onto the garden of a convent. Pierrot's neighbour was an old workman, very quiet, never spoke. Further away there were some couples, who looked after themselves. The proprietor didn't care about anything much. A slatternly servant had never tried to seduce Pierrot. She wasn't a bad girl, anyway. Pierrot liked his digs first.

The day after his second expedition from the Amusement Park he got up quite late for him, about seven, having lain awake in bed. He carefully washed any part of himself that might have smelt unwholesome, wet his hair, brushed it down with his hands, wiped his shoes on the turn-ups of his trousers; now he's ready, now he's standing before a steaming cup on a counter, he reads a racing paper to pick out the little gee-gee on which he'll later risk a couple of coins, he'll think about that all morning, it's only eight so far.

He went up into his room again. 'The floor had been swept and the bed made. Pierrot spread out the racing paper so's not to dirty the eiderdown and then lay down. He smoked. He waited for the time to pass. All the men had gone to work. The maids chattered among themselves. Cars purred up the street, little girls were playing in the convent garden. Everything very peaceful.

From time to time Pierrot shut his eyes. Ten minutes, a quarter of an hour leapt by like that. When he opened his eyes nothing had changed. Then he took up another cigarette and puffed the smoke slowly towards the ceiling. A large sunbeam lay in front of the window, which was open on the balcony. Big bluebottles buzzed in, then buzzed out again angrily. Little flies were strolling about everywhere. The maids had gone to the market, the playground of the convent was empty, traffic rumbled some way off. Everything changed bit by bit with the passage of time.

At half nine Pierrot got up, folded his racing paper, and got going. It was quite a way from his hotel to the Amusement Park : he went on foot. He walked slowly, hardly lifting the soles of his shoes from the asphalt. He stopped to look in shops, furniture shops whose owners had country-houses, shops that sold stamps, shops that sold bicycles, shops that sold papers, garages. He didn't miss the man who made ball-bearings, who showed in his window little steel spheres bouncing mathematically on tambourines of the same metal. Then he went up the Avenue de Chaillot, and there in front of him was the Amusement Park : its monumental gateway held up by naked women in pink stucco, with fuzzy hair, huge breasts and wide hips ; the huge construction of the Scenic Railway ; the tower of

the Chair-o-Planes. Without hurrying he passed by the closed gate, by the wall of the Dance Pavilion, then turned right into the Rue des Larmes, by the side-gate, also closed.

He'd never been in this street before. Some garages and cafés occupied its left side, also a villa that must have dated from the days of Louis Philippe. On the other side the wall of the Amusement Park stopped twenty yards from the Avenue de Chaillot. Farther along, separated from the street by a grille, there was a sort of chapel, in a kind of square. Pierrot took no interest in this at first. He did sentry-go, cagerly watching the end of the street, where Yvonne might appear. But Yvonne didn't show up. When noon struck it began to look as if she wasn't coming that day.

Pierrot then noticed a man coming out of the Louis Philippe-looking villa ; who locked the door behind him ; who crossed the road ; and, with a second key, unlocked the grille ; walked across the square ; then with a third key opened the door of the chapel, it certainly seemed to be a chapel, but of a kind unknown to Pierrot, who was in any case no church-crawler. The man went into the chapel. The door shut behind him Pierrot was interested. He thought he might have a look Finally he went across, but the man was coming out at that moment. So Pierrot said :

“ Excuse me, sir, could you tell me——”

But the other interrupted :

“ Are you a Poldavian, young man ? ”

“ Me ? No. In fact, I don't know what a——”

“ Just a pusybody, then ? ”

“ Well, I was just passing, sir, and——”

“ Now, now, young man, d'you mean to say you don't know what this chapel is ? ”

"I'm afraid I don't, sir."

"Well, of course it's not very well known. There are books that would tell you all about it, but they're very learned and only to be found in museums."

"I don't get much time for reading."

"I am not reproaching you with that fact, young man. So you just asked yourself what this chapel could be, eh?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry if——"

"Not at all, but——"

He took a gold hunter from his pocket and looked at the time.

"—it's time for my lunch. Another time. Au revoir, young man."

And he crossed the road. Opening with his first key the door of his house, he went in.

In front of a garage, some workmen were arguing the toss. Pierrot approached the group and inquired politely of the origins and nature of that little monument over there, in the square.

"Search me, mate," said one.

"What's it got to do with you, anyway?" asked another.

"It's a chapel," answered a third. "To get in, you got to ask the bloke that lives opposite."

"Go on?" said the other two admiringly, astounded by the extent of his knowledge.

They started all at once to take notice of this thingummy they'd never noticed until now.

Pierrot thanked them for the information. Then he went towards the Universal Bar, a café well known in the neighbourhood, on the corner facing Pradonet's house. The gaffers from the Amusement Park used it; a cigarette

counter and a totalisator attracted a good clientele ; female camp-followers used it as a post of observation and information ; the sandwiches were good. Pierrot ordered one, that had ham in it, with lots of butter and mustard, and, as was the custom, dipped it in white wine. He hoped to see Paradis, who wasn't there. Then, biting into his lunch, he went across to the tote. Too late, he might've known. On the programme he looked for his horse and wasn't sorry he'd failed to back it. He turned towards a pin-table and put a coin in the slot. Soon there was an admiring circle round him. It was marvellous to see the steel balls following their appointed course, rolling down paths obstructed by the most cunning devices, falling into place, ringing bells, lighting the machine up like a Christmas tree. Pierrot made 22,000 on his first game, 7,000 more than he needed to have a buckshee go. On the second he reached 30,000 ; on the third he went back to 16,000 ; on the fourth he climbed again to 31,000. All this for a franc. He'd finished his sandwich and left the game to anybody else who wasn't afraid to look silly playing after him.

" Well, well, my boy, you seem to be in form."

Pierrot thought he recognize that voice, but he wasn't sure. He drank his white wine unhurriedly, then :

" I do my best," he said modestly.

" What's your worst—sending your boss flying arse over tip ? " replied Pradonet.

" How much do I owe you ? " Pierrot asked the waiter.

" Don't run away. I won't hurt you. Ha ! ha ! ha ! That was a hell of a joke to play on me, that was. Ha ! ha ! "

Pierrot pocketed his change, wondering how he could escape.

"I recognised you," Pradonet insisted. "I've a memory for faces. And what're you doing now?"

"I'm down the pan," Pierrot told him resolutely.

Pradonet examined him for several seconds in silence, then :

"I feel bad about you, you know."

He turned towards an individual with an air as distinguished as his beard, who stood behind him :

"Here's a boy who'd suit you," he said.

"All right," said Crouia Bey, "but he'll have to take his glasses off."

"What's the job?" asked Pierrot.

"You'll be dressed up as a Hindu," said the fakir. "I've got the costume, and you'll hand me what I need with respectful gestures. I'll show you how to do it. I'll make you up, too."

"How's that suit you?" asked Pradonet. "You'll be in the first gaff on the right, beyond the pay-box."

"Be there tonight at eight," added Crouia Bey.

"But they'll never let me in," said Pierrot.

"I'll give 'em orders to," said Pradonet, "but no more passes at my daughter, mind, or else. What you do outside's your own business. But not in working hours, understand?"

"Thank you, sir," said Pierrot.

"See you this evening," said Crouia Bey.

"How much do I get?" asked Pierrot.

"Ten francs a night," said Crouia Bey.

"What, all night?" asked Pierrot.

"Yes," said Crouia Bey.

"Twenty francs then," said Pierrot.

Pradonet began to laugh.

“ The boy’s got guts.”

And to the fakir :

“ Go on, give him fifteen.”

“ I won’t argue,” said Crouia Bey, “ but it comes out of my salary. However, since you say so——”

To Pierrot :

“ All right, fifteen. Tonight at eight.”

The two men went off, Pradonet pleased as Punch, the fakir plainly peeved. Pierrot went out after them, keeping his distance. Coming back up the Rue des Larmes he looked at the house and the chapel, but didn’t dare go near them. Then he thought he’d look at the Seine, and turned in that direction. He walked nonchalantly, as was his habit, thinking less about his new job than about the significance of that small monument.

A few yards away from the customs-house he passed by an old café ; a game of billiards was dragging to a close inside ; on the terrace, consisting of two or three iron tables and chairs, he saw that man again, drinking a beer. He went across.

“ Well, well,” said the guardian of the chapel, “ looking for me, young man ? ”

“ Not at all,” Pierrot told him, “ it’s only by chance that I——”

“ But you look very pleased to see me again, all the same.”

“ It’d be difficult for me to contradict you, sir, but——”

“ Why don’t you sit down, young man ? ”

Pierrot sat down. A waitress came and asked him what he’d have ; the old boy finished his beer rapidly and ordered two more :

“Curiosity must have sharpened your wits,” he said.
“You ran me to earth straight away.”

“But I assure you that I wasn’t——”

“Don’t attempt to deny it, now. In any case what does it matter? Although curiosity certainly killed the cat——”

Pierrot got up :

“I wouldn’t like you to think——”

“Sit down.”

Pierrot sat down.

“I’m going to tell you the story of my life,” the old man said.

“What about the chapel?” asked Pierrot.

“Listen and don’t interrupt.”

He coughed three times and then told the following story :

“I was born in that house which you saw in the Rue des Larmes, where I have always lived. In those days long, long ago, the Rue des Larmes was only a cart-track, barely negotiable in winter, and the Amusement Park didn’t exist. There was nothing in the neighbourhood but waste land, small workshops, stables, workmen’s huts, unsalubrious enterprises, horse-dealers, farms and the like. It was an evil neighbourhood : one was always coming across women cut to bits or informers with their throats slit. We used to bolt ourselves in at night : my father had a shot-gun. Sometimes I’d hear screams in the night, enough to make you shiver. I couldn’t sleep a wink.

“My father was a great big hulking man about six feet tall, and the last member of an old family from Argenteuil, who at one time owned most of the land between the fortifications and the Seine, in this part of Paris. And the ground on which the Amusement Park now stands belonged to

him too. Well, nowadays I suppose you would look on him as a failure, but that did not seem to stop him from being happy, despite, of course, a few regrets. He had imagined himself to be an artist ; he wanted to become a painter, but he only succeeded in getting a model with child, my mother, who afterwards became an excellent woman of the utmost modesty. It was thus that I knew her, thus that I saw her die.

“ Having knocked about doing nothing for some time, my father eventually found his real metier : modelling in wax. The busts modelled by him were exhibited both in fairgrounds and in anatomical museums. He was the best known maker of waxworks in Paris : he could do a wonderful likeness and no one knew better how to reproduce, from the material at his disposal, the peculiar abnormalities of the human body or the corruption that flesh is heir to. I have already told you that the neighbourhood we lived in was hardly reassuring : the house itself now became even worse. Although I was never allowed in my father’s studio I would stumble from time to time, when I was least expecting them, upon decapitated heads that turned my stomach upside down. And when, in bed at night, I heard a noise or a strangled scream for help, I would imagine that a dead man, still warm and stained with his own blood, had crept into the house to lead the infernal choir of waxwork figures. Lying there, I used to sweat with fear.

“ So, from the age of thirteen onward, I did all I could to persuade my parents to apprentice me to a trade. I gladly left that house of terror, but what I went to was in a way more terrible. You can have no idea what it was like to be an apprentice half a century ago, and since life was hard enough for grown working-men, it was sheer misery for a

lad of fifteen. How I began to regret the life I had left behind me, but it was far too late for recrimination ; I had to undergo these hardships, working without pause for breath, starving for lack of food. And my military service, when I was called up, seemed, by comparison, a wonderful holiday. Ah, what memories ! To have friends and comrades, to travel in foreign lands . . . I did my time in North Africa, young man, and in the Hussars to boot—a fine regiment. I very nearly signed on for good. But at the last moment I became ill of a tropical fever and was sent home.

“ Hardly anything had changed during my absence. There were more workmen’s shelters, more allotments, and in the waste lands young ruffians were playing games. At the corner of the Avenue Chaillot, a greyhound track had grown up, and attracted a mixed clientele of ragamuffins, dog-fanciers and rich sportsmen. But at night all this reverted to a mournful silence, and only the cries of people being set upon and murdered detracted from the utter stillness pervading the spot. Our old house was still standing : I was never to leave it again. I learned to model from my father : I was a man now and had seen worse things than waxwork figures : in any case my father had given up the manufacture of anatomical pieces in favour of portraiture, and busts of great men. It was in this branch of the art that I was to carry on my father’s tradition, which I never let down.

“ My father, I need not tell you, was of a saturnine and gloomy temperament, which I have in part inherited. Perhaps solar or mercurial influences prevented me as a child from taking pleasure in the sight of purulent chancres or children born with calves’ heads. But it was not long

before I began to like solitude, the life of a recluse, my pipe, and to frequent the society of women from houses of ill-fame, when the need took me. In fact I adopted the habits of a confirmed bachelor. I never married, although I loved several women madly : an Arab dancing girl, for whose sake I almost became a Muslim ; later, a female butcher in the Avenue Chaillot. You know that people following that trade have a peculiar rich texture of skin all their own. Anyhow, neither one nor the other made me long to pass all my days on this earth in their company.

“ My father died a few months after the death of my mother. It was afterwards that I learned to appreciate and to savour the delicious sourness of a solitary life. As I’ve already said, I never got married. I told you also that my family owned all this part of the city right up to the Seine. But when my father was the only member left alive, all that remained to him was our house on one side of the road and on the other the piece of ground occupied at present by the Amusement Park—and by the chapel. You may have noticed that the ground adjoining this takes the form of a rectangle. It is the site of a vegetable garden that my father had planted there. Shortly after his death a man came and suggested that I should sell him the property I’d inherited. I hesitated. He offered me what was a large sum of money for those days. I gave way, but I kept for my own use the vegetable garden, promising to let him have the first offer if I ever decided to sell. Life went on as before, except that I now had a little money, and did not have to worry about my old age, for I had invested the money in gilt-edged securities, both here and abroad. As for the garden, I went on cultivating it assiduously.

“ Well, one morning as I was tending my lettuces (I had a lovely crop that summer, twenty years ago—I was just entering into my fiftieth year) ; it was in June, a crude fierce sun had just risen over the roofs of Paris, a heat haze shimmered over the Bois de Boulogne—suddenly I heard a horse galloping, then a c-y. My garden was enclosed by a little wooden fence, through which the horse had crashed, and its rider was flung from the saddle, falling like a thunderbolt into the middle of my vegetable garden.

“ He lay still.

“ I rushed forward. He had fainted. He seemed to be half-dead. I called for help. Neighbours ran up. They went to fetch a doctor, the police, and an ambulance. The injured man was carried away. In the meantime he had recovered consciousness and expressed the wish to go home. Next day I learned from the papers that he had died soon afterwards. I learned from them also that he was none other than Prince Luigi Voudzoi, a Poldavian prince, finishing his studies in France, though the rumour had it that these studies consisted principally of drinking and gaming.

“ The funeral took place some days later. I went to it. It was a wonderful funeral, very picturesque and moving. They buried the Prince in Père Lachaise, and after the ceremony I stayed there until the evening, dreaming from those heights that look down upon our capital. I continued to tend my lettuces, but while cultivating my garden I couldn't help thinking about that accident: the most important event in my life, together with my service in North Africa. It had made me famous in the neighbourhood, and I found myself obliged to recount the story several times every day.

Soon I was seized with a desire to know more about Poldavian history ; this people, according to the papers, lived in a far-away mountain region. I borrowed books from the public library, and then I discovered that I couldn't understand history without a knowledge of chronology and geography, which did not seem to me comprehensible without astronomy and cosmography, and astronomy and cosmography I could not fully appreciate without a knowledge of arithmetic and geometry. I therefore started my education *ab ovo*, which means right from the beginning, in Latin (how much more economical and expressive—you see, young man, the advantages of a classical education). At the end of several months I had learned once again the rules of grammar, the formulæ of compound interest, crucial dates in French history, the location of the Great Bear, and many passages from the classics.

“ So the summer and the autumn passed. Then one day as I was sitting outside my door to profit by the declining sun, I noticed a very well-dressed young gentleman who seemed to be looking for something. He approached and asked very courteously if I could not show him the exact spot where a noble foreigner had met a violent death some months previously. ‘Nothing is easier,’ said I, ‘for I was the only witness of the unfortunate accident. It took place facing you,’ I added, ‘in that little vegetable garden opposite, which belongs to me.’ ‘Would it not be possible for you to show me the spot itself?’ he asked me. He quickly added that, if this were not convenient, he would come back another time ; and he asked me to believe that it was not out of vulgar curiosity that he was putting me to this small trouble. He had a very good reason, and to convince

me of his *bona fides* he gave me his name and title, which he thought would be sufficient, and in which he was right. There stood before me a Poldavian prince. 'Prince,' said I, 'I will not hesitate to perform this sacred duty,' and I escorted him to the bed of lettuces into which the other had been thrown to his death. Two simple wooden crosses, one for his head, the other for his feet, marked the spot. This was the method I had chosen of commemorating this remarkable event. The Prince was touched by this little attention, and a tear coursed down his cheek. Then he knelt down in prayer, and stayed for some minutes in meditation beside the spot. I respected his silence and stood to a sort of moral attention, waiting for him to address me again. Which he did, in these words :

" 'Did I understand you to tell me,' said he, 'that this garden belongs to you?' 'Yes, Prince,' I answered. 'You also own the ground around it?' 'Yes, Prince,' I answered. 'Would you be good enough to tell me your name?' 'Arteme Mounnezergues,' I answered. 'And you live——?' 'In that house opposite, Prince,' I answered. 'And you were present at Prince Luigi's accident?' 'Yes, Prince,' I answered, 'I was the only witness.' Then he asked me to tell him exactly what I had observed on the morning of the tragedy. I obeyed at once, with pleasure. The Prince listened with the gravest attention, and when I had concluded my story he assured me that the Poldavian princes would never forget the delicacy of sentiment expressed by the two crosses which I had planted in the garden. He added two words only : 'Thank you,' and climbed into a carriage which, no doubt, had brought him there but which I had not noticed. The carriage drove away.

“After this visit I was all the more anxious to make a closer acquaintance with the Poldavian people and their princes. I could now see quite clearly that the spot marked out by me was evidently fateful. The plants withered in its neighbourhood, the grubs which crawled over them died suddenly, and I found the remains of charred caterpillars on the leaves. And I realised then that this spot was set apart from all others, over-shadowed as it was by the disembodied spirit of what had happened. The window of my room overlooked the garden and although at night I could see no ghost floating there, silvered by the moonbeams, I told myself, nevertheless, that never again could carrots, turnips, lettuces or cucumbers be grown upon this tragic site. And I stood rapt.

“Years passed, and long after the visit of which I have just spoken, I was honoured by the receipt of a singular missive. I was not a little surprised that morning to see the postman entering my gate. No one ever wrote to me. The envelope was large, the notepaper inside of the thickest, and crested, moreover, with the arms of Poldavia, ‘de sable a l’orle de huit larmes d’argent’. I was invited to come to a certain hotel in the Latin quarter next day at five p.m. I went. After having submitted to a most searching examination from the caretaker, I was shown up to the room. It was very small and dark. The Prince was lying on his bed smoking. Near him stood a bottle and two glasses. He signed to me to sit in the chair opposite him and poured out with his own hand a large measure of the raki which he himself was drinking. This reminded me of North Africa, but I dared not ask if he were acquainted with that country. To have done so would have been disrespectful. I

attended carefully to my host. This was the gist of his speech. 'Sir,' said he, 'the princes of Poldavia have decided to erect a monument on the very spot where Luigi fell to his death. We wish to establish a lasting memorial to this sad event, and in order to do so, as you will understand, it is necessary for that piece of ground which is yours to become our property. I am therefore charged to ask you at what price you would consent to sell your vegetable garden.' After all the thought I had given to the subject of fateful spots, of which I have already spoken, it will not astonish you to learn that I was partly prepared for this proposition. I might even add that I felt at once a sort of relief, but I had to think of my previous commitments. I attempted to explain to my host that I had already promised the sale of this ground, eventually, to the gentleman who had bought my other property. The Prince hastened to dispel my scruples. Was it not a case of *force majeure* ? How could one compare this natural wish on the part of the Poldavian princes with the mechanical fulfilment of a contract which was not even a contract, since it was little more than a promise, or not even a promise, but a conditional agreement ? Was I going to put difficulties in the way of an act of piety on the pretext of satisfying the rapacity of a buyer wishing to own all the property within his reach ? No, of course not.

"I consented then to sell the ground, but I soon realized that my host was unable to pay cash. He proposed a system of payments on the instalment plan, which would cover a number of years, and which would also reimburse me for the time and trouble which would be my lot as guardian of the monument that they wished to erect. Finally we came to terms.

“ The building was embarked upon immediately and, in less than six months, a chapel erected on the spot. Then Prince Luigi’s remains were exhumed from Père Lachaise and laid in the tomb.

“ Thanks to the sale of the ground which I had inherited and to the instalments paid to me by the Poldavian princes I was enabled to continue my studies, which I directed principally towards history, ancient and modern, physical and political geography, pure and applied mathematics, the main languages, both dead and alive, physical and natural science, rhetoric and theology. I had two or three years of peace. Then all of a sudden the Amusement Park came into being, insolently clamouring for attention. It was sacrilegious, I told myself, to install a pleasure-ground so close to a tomb. I made representations to the owner, one Pradonet, but he for his part found the proximity of this circumscribed cemetery lugubrious and ill-omened. He proposed to buy back the garden and return Prince Luigi to Père Lachaise. I refused. He became angry. There the matter rested. Since then he has several times made the same proposition to me. I have always rejected it, although in the meantime the situation has somewhat changed. In fact, two or three years after the building of the chapel, the instalments from Poldavia ceased abruptly. Nobody knew where the princes were, or who they were. Thus it is that I became once again the owner of the garden, remaining, however, the guardian of the tomb.

“ That is my story and that of the chapel. What is the chapel ? The mausoleum of a Poldavian prince, without heirs or vassals. What am I ? A self-appointed and faithful custodian. One final point : the reason why the street in

which I live is called the Rue des Larmes is because the municipal authorities so named it in honour of the Poldavian princes, in whose crest tears figure so largely."

Mounnezergues emptied his half-pint.

"Thank you, sir," said Pierrot, "for giving me this information, but really it was not idle curiosity which——"

"I quite understand. No one knows more about the hazards of life than I. Twenty years ago there was no indication that, on the waste land overlooked by my windows, would one day rise the bizarre and garish buildings which make up the Amusement Park, and that I would save from their encroaching cancer a plot of earth where, in a precarious peace, lies the young and noble victim of a tragic accident. Even less would I have foreseen my fate when, in the uniform of the 3rd Hussars, I counted the stars in the African sky; and before that, when I was a child, terrorized by waxwork figures and the cries of lost souls, no oracle could have foretold that I would pass my old age watching over the sepulchre of a Poldavian prince."

Pierrot nodded pensively. His glass was empty.

"Another?" suggest Mounnezergues.

"No, thank you, sir. I have to go. I've got to buy something."

Mounnezergues was indulgent towards white lies. He paid for the drinks after several tentative attempts on the part of Pierrot, and let him go where he pleased. Pierrot thanked the old man once again, and they separated, the one returning to his house, the other walking down towards the river.

The river was not more than ten minutes away from the fortifications, from which it was separated by a region given

up to manufacturers of coffee-mills, aeroplane factories and garages for the repair of various types of vehicle. The straight broad road was only paved in places, grass grew between the stones while the machines hummed. The Avenue Chaillot ran parallel, a peaceful thoroughfare. At the end of it was the Scine, with its fishing-boats and fishermen.

Pierrot's mind was a blank as he walked along ; it needed no especial effort on his part to bring about this state of affairs : it was habitual to him. Thus he arrived on the quay. Traffic noises could be heard from the Route Nationale. The river bank was overgrown with dusty but thriving plants. The fish were biting. Pierrot sat down and lit a cigarette. He watched the static straw hats of the anglers and the fishing lines which drifted with the current, being sometimes jerked brusquely into the air. A sewer emptied itself, tainting the deep fresh water. In green painted boats, fanatical figures crouched over their rods as though turned to stone.

Pierrot was not especially interested in the scene before him. He was indifferent to it. He had come there, not for distraction, but to conjure up the image of Yvonne.

Since the age of twelve Pierrot had been in love hundreds of times ; sometimes he'd even met with success, but this was something quite different : a new country of love to be explored, with limitless frontiers and boundless possibilities. Although he'd had a wide enough experience of women, without, however, straying very far from the street corner, he'd never come across anyone in the least like Yvonne, except, perhaps, women he'd seen on the screen. She was

rather like them, come to think of it, with her blonde hair, her hollow cheeks, the way she swayed her hips. He'd tell her that, she might be pleased. Pierrot shut his eyes, remembering the chatter of the Dodgems track, the dynamic speed of the little vehicle in which she'd pressed against him; the scent which surrounded her seemed once more to tickle his nostrils, his heart turned over and he almost swooned at the memory of the luscious perfume which lent sex appeal to her woman's sweat.

He reopened his eyes. The Seine flowed by, calm and grey. The static straw hats were bowed over their sterile rods. A mongrel dog rolled happily in a pile of dung. Over on the Route Nationale motor-cars and lorries were passing.

Pierrot inhaled a lungful of air. He was still knocked all of a heap. Decidedly this was a grand passion, the real thing, true love. He lit a fresh cigarette from the butt of the previous one, which he had put down near him, and thought things over seriously. He was hooked all right, no doubt about that. But the first thing to do was to meet her again. He chewed this thought over like tender grass, without, however, formulating any definite and practical plan of campaign. Towards the end of the afternoon he got up, stretched and yawned. He was not, however, any further advanced, except that he meant to go back to the Rue des Larmes next morning, in the hope of seeing her again. For the moment to be in love was enough. He retraced his steps vaguely whistling a tune he couldn't remember the name of, but which, had he been more musical, he might have recognized as the song diffused by the amplifier on the Dodgems track while he was circling round and round with

the smashing piece he'd just picked up and with whom he was now so taken.

He arrived at the Universal Café with time to spare before reporting to Crouia Bey. Entering, he found Petit Pouce and Paradis sitting there, each with a plate of pickled onions and a big pint of light ale in front of him. They'd won on the tote.

"Well, me old cocker," said Paradis. "Going to join us?"

"Thanks," said Pierrot.

"What'll it be?" asked the waitress, funny-looking girl she was.

"A half and a ham sandwich with mustard in," said Pierrot.

"Bring him pickled onions and a pint," said Paradis to Fifine, the funny-looking waitress. "It's on me."

"You got slung out again last night, so I hear?" said Petit Pouce, intent on consuming, meanwhile, one of the largest onions.

"That's right," answered Pierrot, laughing, "but that won't stop me going back again today."

"What!" exclaimed Petit Pouce.

"How'll you manage that then?" asked Paradis.

Pierrot told them about his new job.

"No, by Christ," choked Paradis, "you can't expect us to swallow that."

Fifine brought more pickled onions and while Pierrot put them away eagerly the others resumed a scientific argument, based on much study of form, about the merits of various gees bound to romp home in first and others that might be backed for a place.

Pierrot caught them up on the afters, and Paradis ordered coffee and brandy. Petit Pouce said to Pierrot :

“ I hear you been chatting the big boss’s daughter ? ”

“ I’ve only spoken to her twice,” said Pierrot.

“ Well, you’d be a b.f. not to try a pan,” said Petit Pouce, “ there’ve been others before you.”

“ You’re not one of ’em,” Paradis told him.

“ I don’t care either way,” said Pierrot, wiping his glasses on a paper napkin.

He grinned stupidly.

Petit Pouce thought he looked like something the cat’d brought in.

“ What about a game ? ” he jerked his thumb towards the pin-table.

“ Not tonight,” said Paradis. “ We’ve no time.”

“ I’ll come with you,” said Pierrot, putting on his glasses, “ I got to be there at eight.”

Nobody seemed to mind his entering the Amusement Park. One of the bouncers, leaning against the gate, pretended not to see him. Petit Pouce and Paradis left Pierrot, who made for the first gaff on the right, where large posters announced the exploits of Crouia Bey, and described them with the usual superlatives. The posters showed the protagonist with hooks inserted under his shoulder-blades, pulling along a Rolls Royce, or else eating broken bottles and iron bars hot from the fire. Pierrot made a face ; this sort of thing revolted him.

He went in the back door. Crouia Bey was there all dressed up, preparing for the performance.

“ About time,” he said. “ Put this costume on, here, yes, that’s it. Well, go on, shake it up, at the double, what a

time to take. Ah, good, at last ! Come here so I can black your face. Take off your glasses, then, you b.f. Hold still while I get the paint on, right, that's got it. Quick now, this turban. H'm, well, I suppose that'll have to do ; you don't look too bad."

Then he explained Pierrot's duties in detail. The barker came in to see if they were ready. They were. The barker then switched on the loudspeaker, which blared out Ravel's " Bolero " at full blast, and, when some sensualists had stopped before the booth, thinking perhaps a strip-tease act was due to take place inside, he started his patter. Pierrot stood stock still, dressed as a Persian.

At length the hall filled up, and the curtain rose on a sort of ironmongery. Pierrot stood in the midst of this, rooted to the spot. When the fakir made his entrance, Pierrot folded his arms and bowed low.

" I pulled that one off all right," he thought. The other motioned to him. Pierrot, with an obsequious gesture, handed him a hatpin twelve inches long, which Crouia Bey stuck through his right cheek. The point came out of his mouth. At a second sign, Pierrot held out a new hatpin, with which Crouia Bey perforated his other cheek. A third pin was then stuck through the right cheek, and so on and so forth.

Absorbed in his work, Pierrot had not paid much attention to what became of the hatpins, but, about to proffer the sixth, he raised his eyes. Through a fog he dimly perceived some species of implement emerging from the fakir's beard. He turned pale, watching the course of this latest hatpin. It was poised in the air and slowly, having pierced the outer skin, disappeared deep in the fakir's flesh.

Pierrot looked on aghast, with eyes starting out of his head. Then the point of the pin reappeared between the fakir's lips. Pierrot could stand it no longer. Pierrot fainted.

A pandemonium of laughter broke out in the booth.

4

SOME SPARROWS twittered in the tree under Yvonne's window. Cars hooted in the road outside, the roar of traffic came in through the open pane. It must be pretty late, she thought ; all of a sudden the quarrelsome sparrows flew off, all the lot, straight towards the sky. Yvonne, opening her eyes, saw them fly past.

She didn't move for a few moments, stretched out in the same position in which she had fallen asleep, like a pointer. Only her eyes moved. A fat pigeon, flying some distance away, didn't escape them. Then the neighbouring birds, having finished their quarrel, flew down into the tree and started all over again to twitter madly. The blue square of sky was thus crossed only by passing flights, so swift they were sometimes imperceptible. Yvonne liked her window to have no view ; a view imposes obligations. She had grown up behind that window : twelve years old when for the first time she went to sleep in this room, nineteen now.

Time passed ; an alarm-clock demonstrated its passage with the steady application of its loud tick, and the movement of its hands across the dial, luminous at night. Yvonne turned on her side and looked at it. Then she started to

make some furious mental calculations. The problem was how to get through her morning : a solution once reached, she lay back and started to stretch. She felt all her muscles wake and start to squirm about, like a mass of lively puppies. Then she unbuttoned her pyjama jacket and stroked her breasts, trying at the same time to control her breathing, as advised by the health and beauty experts in her favourite magazines. It was certainly time for P.T.

With a large dramatic gesture, she threw back the sheets, leaped out of bed, and, flinging herself flat on the carpet, began to go through the motions which give a woman a flat stomach, firm arrogant breasts, a small waist, slim hips and a round tight bottom. This lasted a full twenty minutes. She went on for as long as she could think of nothing else to do, and the strange positions her body took did not arouse in her any of the bad thoughts they might have inspired in a male onlooker. This was not of course the only care she took of her body ; skipping the performance of its natural functions, which were accomplished with the same regularity and perfection as the girlish rhythm of her gait, Yvonne had to bathe her body, wash it, put scent on it, give it the best possible appearance, paying the same attention naturally to nails, hair and eyebrows. Her body had to be fed, too, and fed well. It had to be dressed, which meant exercising good taste and discretion. It had to be looked at in mirrors.

Yvonne had no time to think of anyone but herself until she was waiting for her nails to dry ; they were painted with a crimson varnish that dried almost black. And at once the Perdrix boy came into her mind. Oh, well, she'd had enough of him. He didn't even give her a good time. No

imagination, either : dumb wasn't the word. A good-looker, but a bad lover. Almost a stooge. And this'd been going on for three days. Three days lost out of her life. She'd been kind enough to him now, she could give him the go-by. She thought of them together in the cardboard gondola, how scared they'd been of falling into the water. It seemed funny, now, and she laughed. When she'd done laughing and as her nail varnish still hadn't dried, she came back to the consideration of young Perdrix : no go. She couldn't stand him. Of all the boy-friends she'd tried out, he was certainly the most ludicrous : no excuse for that. Then again he had no romance in him : no, it certainly wasn't a grand passion. But the grand passion would come in time ; it'd come all right. But one didn't know how, when, where, or, better still, with whom. That's what they all said, anyway. Then the world'd be filled with nothing but moonlight, gondolas, heart-throbs, soul-mates, roses and raptures. Terrific !

Yvonne thought it pointless to speculate any longer on these mysteries, and decided in any case to liquidate young Perdrix that very night. He'd come with his heart in his mouth to make up to her, then she'd tell him : " Hands off, young man." He'd be dumbfounded, etcetera, but in the end it would work out all right. The varnish had dried by now : time to get going. She touched up her face again, put on her hat, and, looking back over her shoulder, made sure that the seams of her stockings were straight ; then she went out of her room and down the stairs, light and fresh as a breath of spring.

She passed the caretaker's lodge, and this character cried out : " Morning, Mademoiselle Yvonne," thinking, " What

a get-up ! Don't tell me she's a respectable girl ! " Had she spoken her thoughts aloud, they would not have astonished Yvonne, who was perfectly aware what people in the house thought about her. And it wouldn't have annoyed her either, for it was simply not possible for her to care less. On the doorstep she stopped as though she'd collided with the wall of light that faced her. She now stood on the threshold of the moment when, stepping out into the street, a woman becomes to strange men the embodiment of their abstract desire.

She was just about to step forward when she realized that the sort of alternate murmur that she could hear mingled with the normal street sounds of eleven o'clock in the morning came from one of the rooms on the ground-floor, of which the window was open but the shutters closed. She did not have to move forward very far in order to overhear the words spoken by the low voices which made up this muted chorus.

The voices were two in number ; Yvonne recognised one of them as Leonie's. She was saying :

" I wondered why you were keeping out of my way."

The other voice said, and it couldn't have belonged to anybody but Croua Bey's, whom Yvonne knew to be occupying that room, but whose accent she had not at first recognized :

" I didn't know you knew my brother."

" I spotted the resemblance at once."

" Extraordinary."

" Just the way it is, Mouillemunche. I'd have known you anywhere."

" Amazing."

"But why didn't you tell me straight away you were his brother."

"I've my position to keep up, remember that, madame."

"True enough. That the only reason?"

"Yes."

"So he's dead?"

"As I've already told you."

"And in the way you told me?"

"Exactly the way I told you."

"He never wrote to you about me?"

"He was very discreet about his love affairs."

"One day he just vanished. That was twenty years ago."

"Yes."

"I hunted for him all over. I nearly went out of my mind. He was my first lover."

"I understand."

"I never heard of him again."

"He'd changed his stage-name. He called himself Torricelli."

"Did he go away on tour?"

"Yes. I was travelling about, too. I didn't hear from him often."

"And it was in the provinces that this happened?"

"Yes. At Palinsac."

"But the girl, who was she?"

"He'd known others in between, if you'll allow me to say so."

"I don't care about that. Who was the woman for whom, because of whom, he died? Where is she now?"

"Why keep on going over ancient history? It's best to forget the past, take it from me."

"That's what you think. I don't."

"You're wrong."

"I loved him."

"Well, I'm sorry to have revived all these painful memories."

"I'm glad you told me about him. I mean that. Thanks, Mouillemminche."

Yvonne heard Leonie opening the door of the room. She walked away.

She could not imagine what she'd be like in twenty years' time, but she was certain she wouldn't still be thinking about young Perdrix, who, it is true, had not been her first lover. What struck her first about the dialogue which she'd just overheard was the name Mouillemminche, which Leonie had applied to Crouia Bey, and which seemed to imply some familiar relationship between them: impossible. What principally impressed Yvonne was the importance attached by Leonie to her first lover, an importance that seemed as absurd as the events in a dream. She must've been fairly bowled over to worry about him at this date! An odd woman! Amazing.

Yvonne crossed the Rue des Larmes, and, a few paces on, a young man drew level with her. He'd run to catch her up. Yvonne, who had been accosted more than once in her life, recognized in him a boy who for some days past had been chatting her at the Amusement Park. Once he had even treated her to a turn on the Dodgems Track, which had ended in a curious way for all concerned.

What'd he got to say now?

"I saw you a long way off. I was walking down the road. I was waiting for you, as we arranged."

“ When did we arrange that ? ”

“ You told me that you often passed this way in the morning.”

“ Really ? ”

“ That’s what you said. Would it bore you if I walked along with you for a bit ? ”

“ You seem determined to do so anyway.”

“ If you don’t object. By the way, d’you know, another extraordinary thing happened to me the other evening.”

“ Oh? Do extraordinary things often happen to you ? ”

“ I don’t know about that, but you couldn’t call them ordinary. Didn’t your father tell you ? ”

“ No.”

“ Well, he behaved pretty decently, after what I did to him, d’you remember ? ”

“ Yes, I do, now I come to think of it.”

“ He got me a job with the fakir. The new show, you know, down by the gate. And would you believe it, I was so upset seeing him stick pins in his cheeks that I fainted. He wasn’t too pleased, the fakir. So now I’m out of a job again.”

“ Well, I certainly can’t help you to find one.”

“ I wouldn’t dream of asking you. I’ve got along all right till now. No, I was just telling you that for something to say. And also to explain that it wouldn’t be very wise of me to show up at the Amusement Park just now. You saw how they threw me out the other day ? ”

“ No.”

“ Your name is Yvonne, isn’t it ? ”

“ Where d’you get that from ? ”

“ Friends of mine. D’you know you’re the prettiest, the

most beautiful, the smartest girl I've ever dared to speak to ? ”

“ Where d'you rake up the courage from ? Shouldn't have thought you had it in you.”

“ It's nothing to do with me, it's to do with you. When I look at you, I think I'm at the cinema. You seem to have stepped straight out of the screen. It's amazing really.”

“ And who's your favourite film star ? ”

“ You.”

“ What films have you seen me in ? ”

“ Films that nobody but me ever sees. Whenever I close my eyes. No kidding.”

“ What rot ! ”

“ Cross my heart and hope to die. But, course, it's much better when I'm really with you, like we are now.”

“ I think so, too. I can look after myself then ; how do I know what you do with me in your dreams ? A funny bloke like you. Tell me, does he really stick pins in himself—the fakir, I mean ? ”

“ Bet your life. It gave me a proper turn.”

“ Then he's a real fakir ? ”

“ Well, of course, being a fakir, he's up to all sorts of tricks. Have you never been to see him ? ”

“ I can't leave the Gallery.”

“ Of course not. By the way, we had a good time on the Dodgems the other night, didn't we ? ”

“ Yes, not too bad.”

“ Wouldn't you come out with me again one day ? Not in the Park, somewhere else ? We could go to a cinema or dance.”

“ I can't come out in the evenings, not for all the season.”

“ You couldn't get a girl-friend to stand in for you ? ”

"Not likely. My dad'd blow his top."

"Then you're never free!"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you."

"What about the early morning? It's nice to go for a walk then. Healthy too!"

"Thanks, I like to get up late."

She stopped suddenly.

"You must leave me here. I'm going to call on someone in this street. See you again soon, perhaps. I quite often come along here."

She held out her hand, which he kept in his.

"Then there's no way of us getting together for a bit longer one of these days?"

"No."

She drew her hand back and walked away. Pierrot watched her receding down the street. A little further along she turned into a small newsagent's shop, that also sold sweets; in the window, smeared with dust, strips of liquorice tied together like bootlaces, reels of cotton, and various publications (some intended for children, other plainly for adult consumption) were displayed. Some lop-sided tin soldiers threatened each other with their swords and rifles, propped up against old calendars whose leaves were definitely in the sear and yellow. Outside, the daily papers were pegged up like laundry to the public gaze. The owner lived behind the shop, and came out whenever the cracked doorbell rang.

As usual she shot forward when her daughter came in.

"Hello, Mums," said Yvonne, touching her mother's forehead with her lips lightly so as not to leave a smear of lipstick.

"Well, well," said Mme Pradonet joyfully, "so here you are ! It's been three months since you last came to see me. If I read your note right, you're staying to lunch ? "

"Yes, Mums," said Yvonne, and started to look at a film weekly.

"What made you come ? "

"Nothing," Yvonne answered.

She raised her eyes to her mother's with an expression of perfect innocence.

"Nothing at all," she said, and went on looking at the photogravure.

"You were never a good liar," said Mme Pradonet. "How's your father ? "

"He's well."

"And that Leonie?"

"She's up to something with the fakir."

Mme Pradonet burst out laughing :

"The fakir ? What fakir's that ? "

"I'll tell you about it later."

"And what about you, dear ? I forgot to ask ; you all right? "

"I'm fine."

She finished looking at the paper. She replaced it on a pile of its kin.

"When are we eating ? " she asked.

"Right now, if you like. I'll grill you a chop. You're still looking after your figure, I hope?"

The table was laid in the room behind the shop. On the gas-stove something was simmering in a saucepan. The two women started to scrape radishes. Mme Pradonet started to talk vaguely about her daily life : the landlord who was rude,

the cat that went on the tiles, the children who played pranks and pinched papers ; in fact, all the little things that could poison a peaceful life. Mme Pradonet, a meagre body and badly turned out, talked in any case without conviction and didn't expect her daughter to be interested. She talked because she liked to, in the first place ; secondly to fill in time, since Yvonne didn't seem disposed as yet to tell the story of the fakir. While she talked she helped herself to huge slices of bread and smeared butter on them. Yvonne noticed that, despite her mother's diminutive proportions, she had an appetite almost equal to that of Leonie. Which surprised her.

"What're you looking at me like that for ?" asked her mother.

"Your teeth aren't likely to get blunt, are they ?" answered Yvonne.

"What d'you expect? There's not much fun for a woman my age. When I was young, of course. . . . D'you think it's fun, the way I live ? Ah, your father's a dirty beast. Setting that woman up in my home, and casting me aside like a soiled glove."

"I've heard all that hundreds of times. You oughtn't to have put up with it. There's always a gun, or vitriol, or you could've gone to law."

Mme Pradonet shrugged her shoulders.

"That's not my line," she said. "But Pradonet will pay for this one day, one way or another. And you'll see, I won't even get any pleasure out of it. As for Leonie——"

"Ah, that reminds me, I meant to tell you about the fakir."

"Wait till I grill your chop."

While her mother was cooking Yvonne pensively arranged in a circle round her plate the tails of her radishes. Mme Pradonet, who was something of a psychologist, asked her :

“ Are you in love ? ”

“ Me ? Not likely ! ”

“ Why shouldn't it be likely ? It happens to lots of other people. Even I, if I wasn't still fond of your father——”

She solemnly raised the fork with the chop stuck on it.

“ — I believe it could happen to me even now.”

“ Don't make me laugh,” said Yvonne, in a tired voice.

They pitched into the chops, black on the outside and bleeding within.

“ What about this fakir ? ” asked Mme Pradonet.

“ He's called Crouia Bey. He's working in the first gaff on the right, near the main gate. Not very nice, big moustache, about forty, very smooth, hypnotic eyes.”

“ I see,” said Mme Pradonet. “ I've known loads like that. Got to be careful with 'em.”

“ Well,” said Yvonne, “ as I was coming to see you I overheard Leonie talking to him.”

“ Oh ? What were they saying ? ”

“ The gist of it was a chap Leonie's been in love with twenty years ago, who let her down and later died, and who Crouia Bey knew.”

“ D'you say twenty years ago ? ”

“ I think so.”

Mme Pradonet made a mental calculation.

“ At that time Leonie and I were fairly thick. We used to dance the can-can together at a place called the Boîte à Dix Sous. She was younger than me, and we had on hoola-

hoola skirts, right above the knees. There were plenty of men after us, too, but we used to keep them at arm's length. We weren't loose girls, we were choosey. Who on earth could it have been ? ”

“ I don't know, but what struck me as funny was she called Crouia Bey Mouillemiche.”

“ Mouillemiche ? ” cried Mme Pradonet. “ How silly of me not to have thought of that before ! Mouillemiche ! Of course ! She was quite crazy about him, and she nearly did go crazy when he threw her over. He was a fine-looking boy with a lovely voice, he used to sing at the Boîte too. A tenor he was. To hear him made you go all gooey. All the girls chased him, not me of course, but he picked on Leonie. I say ‘ not me ’ because artistes, well, they're not steady. Mind you, plenty of men who're not artistes treat women badly. Your father for instance.”

“ Poor old Dad ! ” said Yvonne. “ He thinks he's such a good business-man.”

“ Well, I must say that he got up from nothing to own that Amusement Park. You'll come into a nice bit of money some day.”

“ That may be,” Yvonne said indifferently, “ but without Leonie he'd never have got there.”

Mme Pradonet said no more. She put cheese and fruit on the table.

“ You must admit it.”

“ Could be.”

“ You know it as well as I do.”

“ All the same, you don't expect me to sing her praises, do you ? ” exclaimed Mme Pradonet.

“ No, of course not. Poor Mums ! ”

They finished the meal in silence. Mme Pradonet took a liqueur with her coffee. Yvonne didn't care for that. She lit a Virginian cigarette.

"Leonie must've recognized Crouia Bey," she went on in a bored voice. "I don't know if she'd ever seen him before. He's the brother of this Mouilleminche."

"I didn't know he had a brother."

"Haven't you been listening to what I've been saying, because far's I'm concerned . . ."

"Tell me more about what you heard."

"Leonie's very curious about the girl Mouilleminche died for."

"How's that?"

"Well it seems Mouilleminche died because of some girl from the provinces, and Leonie wants to know who it was. Mind you, that was ten years ago, if I got it right. She seemed to be more interested in the girl than anything. Funny, that."

"You know Leonie, although she seems so business-like, has always had odd notions. Example, to go and pick on Pradonet for a lover. But I can understand her. When you have a past, my dear, one day, you'll see what a strange thing it is. First it seems all overgrown with weeds, and one can't see anything at all. Then there are bits so beautiful one touches them up again every year, sometimes one colour, sometimes another. And in the end it doesn't look anything like it was really; to say nothing of the things one thought were very clear and simple when they happened, and then finds out years afterwards weren't a bit what they seemed, like you can pass something every day without noticing it, and then all of a sudden you do. It's quite

natural for Leonie to be interested in a woman the man she loved died for. Quite natural. Much funnier ideas than that are entering people's heads every minute. You'll find that out when you have my experience."

"Sounds rather grim to me, Mums."

"And what about you, my dear? Tell me what's been going through *your* head all this time."

"Nothing to write home about."

"Still not thinking of getting married?"

"God, no!"

"Any boy-friends?"

"Pooh!"

"I know, I know, at the Amusement Park you must've lots of them making up to you. Anyway it'll teach you to know men. A lot of windbags! Only one out of ten makes a decent lover."

"You're right there."

"You'll find out that for every one you lose you'll come across ten more. Course that doesn't apply to the good ones. If you lose one of them, you've not much chance of getting another. One doesn't win the jackpot twice. That's how it is with me. After Pradonet. And anyway I'm still fond of him. Mind you, I could look round if I wanted to, but what for? Share a bed with some old retired fool that I'd have to look after all day. No, thank you, I'd rather be faithful."

Yvonne listened to this discourse without much emotion.

Mme Pradonet went on:

"But what about you? You don't say a word, you don't confide in me. Tell me about yourself. I'm your mother, aren't I, for God's sake?"

Yvonne asked herself if a tiny liqueur was enough to make her mother swear.

But Mme Pradonet wasn't drunk. She was merely expressing her sentiments forcefully, invoking the deity like a lyrical poet.

"Lord God Almighty!" she went on, "you come to see me once in three months, and you can't find anything to say!"

The bell went. Mme Pradonet shot into the shop. Yvonne followed, finishing her cigarette.

Two urchins had entered the shop, looking sly and up to something. Two or three others had their noses squashed against the pane. Mme Pradonet asked:

"Well, my dears, what d'you want?"

One of the little ragamuffins took a tin soldier out of his pocket and asked:

"You wouldn't have a letter for him, would you, ma'am. You see, he's French."

"A letter," exclaimed Mme Pradonet, astonished. "Who'd write to a tin soldier, even if he is French?"

The other urchin was twisting himself with laughter, one hand crammed into his mouth. He took advantage of Mme Pradonet's astonishment to pocket the latest issue of a comic enormously appreciated by children from this neighbourhood.

Yvonne intervened.

"Get out of here, you dirty little beasts!" she cried.

The dirty little beasts beat a retreat en bloc; the snaffled comic was returned to its place.

"We ain't done nothing, mademoiselle," whimpered the checkier of the two.

"Go on, scram," said Yvonne.

She took them by the collars and pushed them out on the pavement, to the heartless joy of their contemporaries, who were awaiting the outcome of the joke. They all ran away. Yvonne slammed the door.

"How silly children are!" sighed Mme Pradonet.

"They've got to have some fun," said Yvonne. "Well, Mums, thanks for lunch. Glad to have found you so well. See you again soon."

They kissed.

"Goodbye, my child," said Mme Pradonet, "and don't leave it so long next time."

The cracked bell rang and Yvonne found herself outside in the street. The sun beat down; people weren't very energetic at this time of day.

But as Yvonne walked down the street a stone, flying through space, passed before her eyes. The passage of the stone was accompanied by a shrill yell of derision from behind. Yvonne stopped and glanced around her. Two or three stones struck the ground round her feet, raising small cloud of dust. The youthful jokers were having their revenge; they occupied a strong strategic position, ambushed behind trees, with a stock of ammunition to hand, intended originally for the repair of the sidewalk.

The boys were bracketing, and their aim became less and less approximate. Yvonne as a kid had thrown as many stones as the boys, and sometimes at them; she knew all about it. Without standing on her dignity, she dived for cover behind a big palm tree. Profiting by the success of their first attack, the assailants carried out a flanking movement; a small raiding party crossed the road, and advanced from tree to tree, cross-firing. Yvonne retreated by several

trees, and waited patiently for some brave passer-by to disperse this army of little demons. She knew enough about life to know that he would appear in time ; the chances in favour of his appearance being in the nature of a dead cert.

And appear he did. He attacked from behind the mass of the children's army, and dispersed it, generously distributing slaps and kicks up the backside. It was a complete rout. The avenger, holding by the collar the one he judged to be the commander-in-chief, banged his head several times against a tree-trunk to teach him a lesson. Then he sent him flying ; the kid skinned a knee on the asphalt, scrambled up and ran away.

The bloke went over to Yvonne. She recognized him. A gaff from the Amusement Park, approaching his work by easy stages. His fight with the little pests didn't seem to have put him out much ; this big blond geezer usually preserved his stolid calm in the face of events, although "fate" (fatalitas) had decreed that, despite his habitual kindness to human beings, he had several times been sentenced for causing grievous bodily harm.

Paradis raised his cap a few inches from his head and exclaimed, simulating surprise:

"Why, Mademoiselle Yvonne !"

He added in a tone of interest :

"Were they throwing stones at you, the little stinkers ?"

He rounded off this conversational gambit by the amused question :

"What'd you been doing to them?"

"I gave them a flea in the ear, but never mind why."

Paradis understood at once that any censorious remark

about children in general, and the little thugs of the neighbourhood in particular, would be greeted with indifference and even boredom ; Yvonne evidently wanted to change the subject. All he could find to say was :

“ You coming along to the Park, now, mademoiselle ? ”

“ Yes. ”

“ Mind if I come along too ? ”

“ No. ”

They walked on in silence.

Paradis searched about for something to say, such phrases as “ Here, you’re a smashing bride, I’ll bet you wear silk undies, ” or else “ Hey, when’s your old cowson of a dad going to give us a rise ? ” came to mind, but he realized that these would not do, and that he’d have to find something on a higher plane. He thought he’d try the weather first, although he knew that this wouldn’t get him very far.

“ Fine day, isn’t it ? ” he said.

“ Yes. ”

She looked him over.

She found him all right. She’d noticed him more than once at the Amusement Park, but he’d never taken any notice of her.

He, after his meteorological observation, wondered what on earth he could bring out next, except rude remarks about the Amusement Park or invitations to copulation. Of course he’d never taken any notice of Yvonne: he knew she was a cut above him. Conscious of social inferiority, he hardly dared to look at her : he didn’t want to fly his kite too high, nor to run the risk of a sloppy affair like one saw on the flicks or read about in novelettes,

where blokes pine away for love of some inaccessible tart, although they try to make out he gets her in the end.

At the same time the proximity of this pretty girl began to do things to him, and, while still looking for an innocuous topic of conversation, he tried to make up a poem.

As thinking of two things at the same time was beyond him, he found it difficult and didn't dare open his mouth for fear of stammering.

But Yvonne asked him :

“ Are you still in the Palace of Laughter ? ”

Ah, that'd be something to talk about.

“ Yes, still there,” he, answered.

“ Is it hard work ? ”

“ It's tough at week-ends and holidays, but other times we're pretty slack. So much so we often give a hand to pals from other gaffs.”

“ What exactly do you do ? ” asked Yvonne.

“ Well, I . . . ”

Paradis hesitated. Suddenly he realized that it would be difficult to explain, without once again verging on the indelicate. And as it flashed across his mind that he might make the boss's daughter, the one waltzing along beside him, go through the erotic humiliation that he inflicted every night on all women who strayed into the Palace, he had some difficulty in finding an answer which would not have had repercussions.

“ Well, you know, there are a lot of thingummybobs get in people's way, see ? I help the ladies over the difficult bits.”

“ I've never set foot in your Palace,” said Yvonne.

This sentence instantly transformed Yvonne in the mind

of Paradis. All the whispers he'd heard about her were hushed and she appeared to him radiant with purity, chastity, and virginity.

"But," she continued, "surely that can't be such hard work."

The whispers started up again. Black clouds obscured the radiance as though conjured up by a magician. Paradis took Yvonne for a pervert, and decided on the spot that he'd have her, and not later than that very night.

"No, of course not," he said negligently, "but it's the onlookers see most of the game."

"I know," Yvonne told him.

This remark took him aback, but all the same he went on :

"There's a draught comes up through a grating, blows up the women's skirts. Girls and all get it" (he was pleased with that "girls and all"). "Then there's a lot of blokes, peepers we call 'em, they come there specially to get an eyeful. The dirty-minded brutes."

"And what about you?" asked Yvonne, laughing. "Don't women interest you?"

"I wouldn't say that," he went on quickly, "but pass the time like that one'd have to be in or a bit off one's rocker."

"You like more concrete pleasures, then?"

Paradis, very embarrassed, didn't know what to answer. She seemed to be making all the running; at this rate, he wouldn't even be able to boast he'd seduced her. As that was what he had every intention of doing, and wanted most to pride himself on, he was fairly angry at being out-distanced.

"I'm like any other bloke," he said without finesse.

"What d'you know about it?" asked Yvonne.

He looked at her askance. She was having him on, no doubt about it.

"What d'you mean, what do I know? About what the others like, or what I like?"

He looked furious, which made Yvonne laugh.

"Anyway," she said, "you don't seem to like the peepers."

"Oh, I dunno," he said, suddenly very tired, "I got to earn a living. There are others do worse."

"I'm not blaming you," said Yvonne.

He felt better now they were no longer talking about the Palace of Laughter. Out of the corner of his eye he admired Yvonne. What a smasher! And he didn't seem to be exactly distasteful to her, although he wasn't at all sure she wasn't taking the bleeding mike out of him.

They had crossed the Rue des Larmes and were passing the walls of the Amusement Park. They approached the Pradonets' house.

"How about taking the air for another five minutes?" Paradis proposed.

Yvonne looked him full in the eye.

"All right," she said. "Five minutes."

MOUNNEZERGUES WAS cooking his dinner when a ring came at the door. He was frying chips. He turned the gas down under the frying-pan. He wasn't expecting anyone. He rather hoped it was that young man, who had taken an interest in the chapel, returning to hear the story all over again, or perhaps just making a friendly call. He opened and saw Pradonet.

He showed him into the dining-room where the table was already laid; went to fetch a bottle and two glasses. They drank.

"It's some time since you came round bothering me," said Mounnezergues, "what's your news?"

"Nonc," said Pradonet.

"What d'you want, then?"

Pradonet took another drink.

"The other day I was showing the Amusement Park to a guest from my balcony. Course he noticed the blot your chapel makes on it. Come now, Mounnezergues, what the hell d'you really care about Poldavian princes?"

"That all you've got to say?" asked Mounnezergues.

It was, for Pradonet didn't answer.

"What," asked Mounnezergues, "makes you think I'd have changed my mind? I'm not gaga."

“ For Chrissake,” cried Pradonet, “ what’ve these princes got on you ? You don’t get a penny out of ’em. They’ve shot the moon. It wouldn’t hurt anyone if the chapel was knocked down and your bloke buried in a cemetery, like anyone else.”

“ Pradonet,” said Mounnezergues, “ for ten years we’ve been having this same talk, it’s a habit we’d miss if we ever did come to any agreement.”

“ But I want that bit of ground, see ? As for our talks, if you don’t mind my saying so, I could get on without ’em.”

“ And I could get on without your money,” said Mounnezergues, “ as you know.”

They emptied their glasses.

“ Another ? ” asked Mounnezergues.

Pradonet seemed to nod. Mounnezergues refilled their glasses.

“ It’s not,” he went on, “ because some rude guest of yours has pointed out to you that your property isn’t as extensive as it might be, that I’m going to make up my mind. No, Prince Luigi’ll stay buried in that chapel, and I’ve taken care that after my death he’ll still stay on.”

“ And suppose I put a bomb under your chapel, and blew up the whole bloody shoot ? What could you do about it, eh ? ”

Mounnezergues laughed.

“ Pradonet,” he said, “ you didn’t think that one up all on your own. Must’ve been Madame Prouillot suggested it.”

Pradonet sighed.

“ You can rest assured, Mounnezergues,” he said, “ that

if Madame Prouillot cared about having that ground bought up, it'd have been done a long time ago. But she doesn't care. She thinks it wouldn't make any odds."

"Shows she's got sense," Mounnezergues said.

"More than you have," Pradonet told him, "throwing away a small fortune, just to let some no-good dago sleep in peace."

"That's it, in peace. Everybody has the right to rest in peace. I suppose you'd think it funny to hang up his skeleton in your House of Horrors, eh? Think of those Egyptian kings that slept quietly for centuries; how they're sending their mummies over to America."

"You wait," shouted Pradonet, "one day they'll dig up your Prince Luigi, same as the others."

"That's what you think. Anyhow he'll have had some peaceful years first."

"That'll do," said Pradonet, "let's stop this silly argy-bargy." He got up.

"Wait," cried Mounnezergues, "I've something else to tell you. You're always moaning, but this time I've got something to complain about."

Pradonet knew all about that, but the other was determined to go over it again.

"You think it's a good thing," asked Mounnezergues, "to run up an Amusement Park near a tomb? You think that shows respect for the dead?"

"Maybe you'd like me to shut up shop."

"I don't know, just think it over."

Pradonet shrugged his shoulders. Mounnezergues got up and conducted him to the door.

"Goodbye, Pradonet."

“ So long, Mounnezergues.”

The latter turned back to his fried potatoes, by now almost cooked to a cinder. The other walked slowly towards his house ; it was his dinner-time too. So he walked on, but not without stopping a moment in front of the modest mausoleum of Prince Luigi. Looking at the chapel, the style of which made him vaguely uneasy, Pradonet thought of something quite different. He thought, oddly enough, about his wife ; but he thought of her in company, for his cogitations led him first to the late Jojo Mouilleminche, Leonie's first lover, and it was only ulterior motives that swept him along on a stormy sea towards the image of Eugenie, his legitimate spouse. He went on home without fully understanding what was bothering him.

During dinner he could see that Leonie too was deep in thought. He noticed also the absence of Yvonne. They had sat down to table without her. From time to time he growled :

“ What the hell's she up to, the little slut ? ”

Yvonne was usually punctual, she'd been well brought up, so her unpunctuality on this occasion seemed to him all the more suspicious. The first idea that entered the father's head and that of the pseudo-stepmother was, of course, some delinquency.

“ Where the hell can she be, the young bitch ? ”

And he was surprised to see that Leonie didn't give a damn, however much he cursed about the non-appearance of his daughter. He shut up finally and from time to time asked vague questions, about Crouia Bey or his brother, the deceased tenor, but received no reply. At nine o'clock Leonie, reporting for duty, left him alone with his glass

of brandy. He thought things over a little longer, and decidedly inwardly that what was getting him down was the real identity of Crouia Bey, for he'd seen the latter's papers, and his name wasn't Mouilleminche at all. So how could he have had a brother called Mouilleminche? Had he been stuffing Leonie up? Pradonet had thought all this out afterwards. At the time it hadn't occurred to him. He hadn't a quick brain, but he could think with it all the same, without being quite sure whether he was coming or going; Crouia Bey might have some quite simple reason for having two names and not being called Mouilleminche like his brother, although Pradonet couldn't imagine what these reasons could be. He decided to give it up, and put this resolution to the motion. It was carried unanimously. Then he went up on the balcony.

Glares and crashes greeted him as usual from below, but his attention was fixed on the zones of silence and shadow: first of all on the Poldavian chapel, then, a new cause for annoyance, the travelling circus which had just pitched camp on the other side of the Avenue Chaillot, opposite the Amusement Park, on a piece of waste ground where some years before they had put up unrelated fragments of an international exhibition. Leonie thought that the presence of this rival entertainment wouldn't do any harm, would rather bring people in. Could be, Pradonet told himself, but he liked to reign alone. His glance roved from tomb to tent, and tent to tomb, coming to rest at last, tired and homesick, on the vibrating and dusty fairground, of which he was the proud possessor.

Suddenly all the noises down there seemed to coalesce, there seemed to be some focal point: screams and yells

floated up to Pradonet on his perch. Then he saw a small puff of smoke drifting slowly towards the sky. The bloody peepers (he suspected them straight away) were setting the Palace of Laughter on fire. Police cars were drawing up in front of the gate, and Pradonet took a sad pleasure in watching the guardians of the law scientifically dispersing the crowd, which seemed to be madly dancing about down below. Then came firemen who turned their hoses on everything within sight, flames and pyromaniacs alike. The firemen went away first, then the police, the merry-go-rounds started to turn, and the people who'd stopped to see the damage moved on.

Pradonet then remembered the absence of his daughter. He turned the telescope on the machine-gun stand : Yvonne wasn't there. He went down into the dining-room, fed up with so much worry. He had a drink on the way, and continued on down into the street. He passed through a little door in the back-yard of his house, and found himself at once in the Amusement Park, just under the Chair-o-Planes. Opposite him the Palace of Laughter drooped miserably, charred and bedraggled, as though in mourning for itself and dripping with tears. Pradonet saw Tortose shouting at his employees. A policeman was moving on the gaping crowd.

"Now, now, what d'*you* want?" he asked Pradonet.

Tortose said quickly :

"He's the boss."

To Pradonet he said :

"What a night ! The Inspector says after this it's finished, they'll close down my stall."

"What happened?" asked Pradonet from a distance, very serene and olympian.

And really very sad, in a way.

"Go on, tell the boss," Tortose told Petit Pouce.

"I'm browned off," said Petit Pouce.

He'd once again been socked several times in the puss, and was dabbing at a cut lip which bled profusely.

"What went on?" Pradonet asked him.

"What's it matter?" said Petit Pouce. "You'll sack me just the same."

"We'll put you in another gaff," said Pradonet.

"You mean that?" asked P.P.

"It's a promise."

Tortose was astonished. As for him, he'd had it. Ruined! he told himself. What the hell had got into the boss?

"Go on, spill it," ordered Pradonet.

"It was like this," Petit Pouce told him, "since the other night there are only two of us, that's not enough. Tonight I was here all on my own, it was a sight worse. Paradis, my mate, didn't turn up. Christ knows why. Maybe he's sick, I don't know. Anyhow, there I was by myself, it's not good enough. Hordes of people, and all the peepers right on the spot, eyes wide open to take in the tarts. We start off: I help the palones over the Cake Walk. Okay so far. But I couldn't be everywhere at once, there's nobody to do the tunnel, the brides wouldn't go by it. Them as had a bloke in tow, he helped 'em. Course, he didn't let them go in the draught, goes without saying, so the peepers weren't seeing nothing. They started to create. They got in a right bloody rage. There's two blondes going by 'em, and they couldn't see no higher than their knees. Things were bad. The geezers began creating proper. Another one gets by 'em and they don't even see her undies. They started to

bawl me out. Then course there's no bugger at the Cake Walk. I run to and fro, but I've only got one pair of hands. Then they get it into their heads to take my place. They climb up and grab the mares, to stick 'em in the wind. The geezers with palones cut up awkward, they started shoving the peepers around. Course pret'y soon socks start flying by and large. Wham ! wham ! bash ! a right proper free-for-all. The peepers start letting loose, the women begin bawling their heads off, the blokes with any sense scarper. The others go on bashing each other about, and beating the rest up. Then a tart come up, I saw her, she sticks her thumb in a bloke's eye, who'd put his hands on her, and tried to pull it out. Then all of a bloody sudden, some bright bastard gets it into his nut to set the place alight. Pretty soon it's blazing merrily. Then up come the bogeys ; they got everybody out pretty quick. They'd calmed down by then. Then the fire-brigade starts turning the hose on us."

Petit Pouce stopped.

Tortose then started up moaning :

" And because of these b.f.s here I'm ruined. The Inspector says to me : too much bloody trouble, he says, goes on in your gaff. This time we're closing you down for keeps. And he says it deserves to get closed down, he says, cause why ? 'cause it's immoral, so he tells me. Anyhow, there I am closed down for good, and what'll become of me now ? And the missis and the nippers ? You're finding him another job, but what about me ? The gaff's get it all their own bloody way. What about my wife and kids ? "

" You've got some money put by," Pradonet told him.

" Lucky for me I have ! Else I'd starve. But it won't go far."

"Bear up, Tortose. You'll think up some other stunt, I know you."

"Don't try to smooth me down."

"What more can I say?"

He held out his hand, which the other shook half-heartedly, then walked away. Petit Pouce thought he'd better keep on the right side of the big boss, so he followed and they walked along side by side.

"What gaff you putting me in, sir?" he asked.

Pradonet turned and, looking at him as though for the first time, said :

"I'll let you know."

"Very good, sir."

No good going on about it. Petit Pouce hadn't reached the age of forty-five without knowing in life one's got to take it, swallow it, put up with it, even if they slap you across the chops or spit in your puss, and then you got to wipe it off and thank 'em into the bargain. So he stayed where he was, rooted to the spot.

As people were banging into him he moved on.

He hadn't enlarged enough on the fact that this would never have happened if Paradis hadn't gone absent without leave, and if they'd taken on Pierrot again : especially if Paradis had turned up. But he hadn't wanted to get Paradis in bad. This mean action would in any case have been pointless, as his mate would have had the bullet anyway. Petit Pouce began to chew over the circumstances of his own life, while his eyes automatically took in the presence of the peepers before a merry-go-round on which girls were mounted on piggy-back, with their clothes pulled well up over their thighs. He took in also the absence of

Yvonne from her machine-gun stall. He saw his whole life clearly as though he were drowning ; in stills with subtitles : his pa and ma, the council school, his apprenticeship, military service, the private enquiry agency (divorce a speciality), his first indiscretion, first swindle, first blackmail, marriage, more indiscretions, more crookedness, more blackmail, real detectives on his rack (ones from the police), sentence and redemption, all the jobs he'd had, of which the worst was certainly not that of hired assassin at the Palace of Laughter ; he'd had much worse in his time. And he didn't even get on with his missis. What a mess-up!

Petit Pouce's feet touched bottom, then he shot up suddenly to the surface on a wave of hate. He looked at the peepers and ground his teeth. He saw the deserted machine-gun stall, and instantly connected the absence of Yvonne with that of Paradis. He looked round for some bastard to pick on, to have a row with. He groaned with malevolence, despair and bitterness. He glared about him ferociously, but all he saw in front of him was Pradonet accompanied by the dame they called Mme Pradonet.

He abruptly abandoned the idea of a fight, the notion of catching on to the big boss's coat-tails came to him again ; it seemed an excellent one. He therefore dashed forward at the double, but when he got there Pradonet had disappeared, leaving only Leonie. Petit Pouce stopped short. Leonie snapped him with her eyes.

She beckoned him. He went slowly forward. He lifted his hat a few inches from his head, stuck it back on his skull and waited for her to speak.

" You work in the Palace of Laughter, don't you ? " asked the dame.

"Yes, ma'am," he gave her a servile smile,⁶ "I did."

"Then you're out of a job?"

She seemed a pretty hard case. Petit Pouce protested, stumbling over his words:

"The boss, Monsieur Pradonet, said he'd sign me on in another gaff."

"Oh yeah?" said Leonie. "You sure?"

"He promised, Monsieur Pradonet promised."

"Wasn't it your fault the trouble broke out?"

"Me? My fault? Oh no, ma'am. Think, I was there all on my own, instead of there being three of us as usual."

"Where were the others?"

"One was sacked a day or two ago, and nobody else taken on, and the other didn't turn up tonight, I dunno why. Maybe he's sick."

Petit Pouce realized then that the woman wasn't the least bit interested in what he was saying, she was just amusing herself making him talk: and sure enough she asked him suddenly:

"You were a policeman at one time, weren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He felt his throat constrict as he said this, but he couldn't deny it. And yet . . .

He went on:

"That's not quite right, ma'am. I worked for a private agency."

"You know how to carry out an investigation, then?"

It was a rhetorical question, more wish-fulfilment than anything else.

Petit Pouce was reassured. No doubt about it, she wanted him to look for her daughter. That is, her stepdaughter.

Yvonne, anyhow. As he didn't know where she was, but had no doubt she was out whoring somewhere, worse still, with Paradis, joy started to boil up inside him; he could hardly contain himself. But he couldn't stop saying:

"Do I know how to, ma'am! You bet. I've done some right proper investigations in my time."

"Now don't bum your load, I won't ask you to do anything hard."

"What d'you want me to do?" asked Petit Pouce, trembling with impatience, especially as he thought he had an open-and-shut case.

"You'd better hear my terms first."

"Anything you say, Madame Pradonet."

"A thousand francs down, and a stable job here if you succeed. Thirty francs a day for fag-money while you're on the job. A thousand advance expenses. More if you need it. You'll have to make a balance-sheet, mind you. In eight days' time you'll have to have the job sewn up. All right with you?"

"Yes, ma'am; oh yes, Madame Pradonet."

He felt as though the sun was striking the back of his neck. He nearly burst into tears.

"And what d'you want me to do, ma'am? What d'you want done?"

Leonie drew him into a dark corner.

I was right, he thought, it's the girl who's on the loose, they want me to find her.

"I'm all ears, ma'am," he said.

"Here's what you've got to do. You know a town called Palinsac. Ten years ago a man called Jojo Mouilleminche died there on account of a young girl. I want you to find the girl."

"Did you say ten years ago?"

"I did."

"That won't be easy."

He choked a bit as he saw it was really hard graft.

"You'll manage," said Leonie.

She took money out of her bag. Petit Pouce thought after all he'd struck lucky. He pocketed the dough and thanked her.

"I got to know more about it, though."

He said that to hide his emotion at the feel of the crisp bank-notes, and not because of any professional conscience.

"You'll have to make do with that," said Leonie, "I don't know any more myself."

"But what'd he do, this chap Mouillemiche?"

"He was a singer."

"There you are, you do know some more."

"He sang on the halls under the name of Chaliaqueue. Then he called himself Toricelli. Must've been about thirty when he died. That's the lot this time."

"What about the girl?"

"She was his mistress."

"Another thing you forgot : tell me."

"That'll do now. Don't start getting funny just because you've touched some dough. And remember to make out an expense sheet. I suppose you'll have to go to Palinsac to find her. There's a train tomorrow morning at five. Take it. And let me know how you're getting on day by day, understand."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll leave tonight, ma'am."

"Right. Now sign this."

She showed him a receipt for a thousand francs. Petit

Pouce signed. She put the paper back in her bag. Having told Petit Pouce she expected to receive soon a wire telling her he'd found the girl in question, she went off.

When she'd gone Petit Pouce asked himself if the girl wasn't by any chance Pradonet's daughter and if he'd not been given his instructions in some code which he was expected to decipher. 'This idea spoilt his pleasure for a bit. He'd thought he'd enjoy himself now he'd a fat wallet.

Having wandered about the Amusement Park for some time he decided in the end that Mme Prouillot meant what she'd said and that he had to embark at the crack of dawn for Palinsac. He'd therefore to go home, pack a bag, and see his good lady, being careful not to let this latter know about the thousand francs in his possession. As he thought of this bank-note he seemed to feel it burning him through his wallet, and decided immediately to break into it. He hurled himself towards the Universal, to order pickled onions and a few pints.

When he entered the café the first people he saw were Yvonne and Paradis. Hell, he thought with regret, if I was only looking for her, the job'd have been done already. Paradis, sitting beside Yvonne, was pressing amorously against her. He didn't seem embarrassed by the appearance of Petit Pouce, and lifted his hand in a gesture which this man interpreted as an invitation to sit at their table. Asking himself if his mate had already slept with the tart, or if that was for later on, he went over.

"Remember him?" Paradis asked Yvonne. "He's my mate at the Palace of Laughter."

"Used to be," said Petit Pouce, sitting down, and throwing his hat at a peg where it stuck.

"Why used to be?" asked Paradis, disquieted.

"What, haven't you heard?" asked Petit Pouce who, doing the polite with Yvonne, added:

"I hope you don't mind, but I'm feeling so like some pickled onions. . . ."

The others were drinking benedictine.

"Don't mind me," said Yvonne, "eat anything you want to. I don't mind if you eat s——"

Paradis put his hand over her mouth.

"She's a bit blindo," he told Petit Pouce.

"Got an evening paper?" asked the latter.

"Here you are. I didn't win."

Petit Pouce applied himself to looking up his horse. They each betted eleven francs every day. Sometimes it paid; other times they made plans, luck wouldn't catch them out. But once again their plans hadn't come off. Petit Pouce handed his mate back the paper.

"It don't matter," he said, tucking into his onions.

"You don't seem to've eaten all day," said Paradis.

"I have, but these are good."

"They stink," remarked Yvonne.

"I warned you, didn't I, but I'll move if you like."

"She's only joking," said Paradis.

He cuddled Yvonne against him. She disengaged herself without saying anything. Petit Pouce didn't know what to think.

"Well," asked Paradis, still a bit worried, "things go off all right without me?"

"You bet they bloody did," answered Petit Pouce, biting into an onion.

"What d'you mean?"

"Hang on, I'll tell you," and he stacked up butter and mustard on a piece of bread.

Yvonne regarded him with amused disgust.

"I'm thirsty," she told Paradis.

"You've had enough," he told her.

He was very scared of her getting drunk. He guessed that if she got tight she'd kick up a stink. That didn't suit him at all.

But she called the waiter.

"A pint ! "

"Don't mix 'em, it'll make you sick," said Paradis.

"I'll have a pint too," said Petit Pouce, methodically tucking into his pickled onions.

"So'll I," said Paradis, who was now sure that the evening'd end in hiccups and spew.

Yvonne smiled straight in front of her, already half-seas over, and enchanted at the idea of drinking beer on top of benedictine before a big thug eating pickled onions in the middle of a cloud of smoke. Bah ! she continued to smile.

The waiter brought three pints of beer. A silence had fallen. Petit Pouce scoured his plate with a piece of bread.

"That's better," he said.

And addressing his mate jovially :

"Guess what ? They gave me the kick-out."

"No kidding ? " asked the other, frowning.

Yvonne turned towards him and laughed in his face.

"And you too, you great big soppy fool," she cried.

"Course," said Petit Pouce good-humouredly.

Paradis looked sad. He'd taken Yvonne on the binge all day, he'd asked her to dinner, he'd paid court to her madly, with a certain amount of fumbling and feeling around, but

he hadn't for a moment expected the push. 'He was an optimist. He'd had a good day, not of course as good as it might've been, because he hadn't yet persuaded Yvonne to grant him the favours she'd already granted to young Perdrix (he was pretty sure about that), to young Tortose (it was possible), and to Paroudont of the Scenic Railway (that's what they said).

He found something to say :

"I can understand about me, but why you?"

He addressed Petit Pouce.

This latter cracked a bit of onion he had left in his mouth, and shook with laughter so much he almost broke wind. He was in an excellent humour, and full of bravado, recounted the incidents which had led to the Palace of Laughter being closed.

"All the same, we ought to go tomorrow and see if it's really closed," said Paradis.

"What's the good?" said Petit Pouce. "I've already told you. What're you going to do now?"

He continued to look at the both of them, asking himself if they had or hadn't fornicated. This intrigued him enormously and made him almost feel that he had to leave for the provinces without having got to the bottom of it.

Paradis guessed that his mate didn't give a damn and that therefore he must have found something else to do. He didn't want Petit Pouce to crow over him, and so wouldn't admit that he was up the spout. So he said :

"Oh, I can wait for a bit. We've been to the races, Yvonne and me, and I did myself a bit of good. So I think I'll take a rest. I've a good mind to do a bit of hiking down south."

"Sure," said Petit Pouce, who didn't believe a word of this story, thinking it was aimed at the tart and not at him.

"He won five thou.," said Yvonne, "now he's going to treat us to champagne."

"Not on top of beer!" moaned Paradis.

The waiter, thinking Paradis was backing out, plunged forward to take the order.

"You lucky old sod," said Petit Pouce to his mate. "I've often seen him win," he added to Yvonne, "times when he didn't seem to stand a chance, on awful old crocks. But lucky at the races, unlucky in love, eh?"

"Bleeding twatt," murmured Paradis.

Then a bit louder:

"Well, if you're so clever, what're you going to do?"

"Me?" said Petit Pouce blandly, savouring his hypocrisy. "I'm up the spout. What's going to become of me, with a wife and kids?"

"Poor old bloke," said Paradis, now certain that the other had fixed himself up.

The waiter danced along buoyantly with the bubbly and drew the cork with an air. He poured it, they touched glasses.

"To your good luck and your loves," said Petit Pouce.

"To your next job," said Paradis.

Yvonne emptied her glass and got up.

"Well," she said, "I'm off now."

Paradis tried to grab on to the hand she held out to him:

"Don't you want me to . . . ?"

"Make it a bachelor party."

He didn't dare insist.

At the door she nearly knocked into Pierrot, coming in.

"Hello," she said to him.

He didn't recognize her at once. He watched her walking away, then his attention came back to the café, where he saw Petit Pouce and Paradis. He went over to their table.

"How's things?" he asked them heartily.

He then realized that the young woman he'd nearly bumped into was Yvonne. He sat down, seeing the three glasses.

"What, was she drinking with you?"

"I've been out with her all day," said Paradis, who felt like grinding his teeth with rage and rolling his eyes with fury, for he thought Yvonne's sudden departure had made him look a fool.

"D'you have her or didn't you?" asked Petit Pouce.

"Any business of yours?"

"I see. She's been playing you up."

"Who, me?"

"I bet you spent a lot of dough on her."

"I always pay for girls I take out. I'm not a ponce."

"No, not much," said Petit Pouce.

He turned to Pierrot, feeling extremely satisfied, as though he'd laid his mate out senseless in the ring. Paradis did nothing more than pour out a glass of bubbly, which he drank at a gulp, like he'd seen done on the flicks, when actors were registering despair.

"Here," he said to Pierrot, "d'you know the Palace is closed down?"

"No," said Pierrot with indifference.

"There was a fight. The peepers set it on fire."

"Straight up?" said Pierrot.

He didn't give a damn. Petit Pouce asked him immediately:

“What’s been happening to you?”

Pierrot didn’t answer. He was wondering what had gone on between Yvonne and Paradis; but he hadn’t seen as much of them as Petit Pouce; he was therefore inclined to believe that they had. He wasn’t greatly surprised, though rather sad. He would have liked to ask his pal the means which he had employed to bring about this result. As he saw the waiter going by, he asked him to bring another glass, so that he too could participate in putting away the ceremonial champagne.

“How’re you getting on?” asked Paradis, pouring him out a drink.

“I’ve not been doing anything,” said Pierrot.

This answer, though not strictly truthful, surprised nobody. They were used to such replies. Their mate went on:

“Here, d’you know that little chapel behind the Scenic Railway?”

“What the hell do we care about any bloody chapel?” said Paradis, still brooding over his discomfiture, and who was no student of archæology or religion.

Petit Pouce, who prided himself, among other things, on having a sharp eye and knowing every inch of the neighbourhood (this was a hangover from his previous occupation, which he was now going to take up again), said:

“The one in the Rue des Larmes?”

“Know what it is?”

He seemed eager to tell them, but they were busy pouring out what was left of the bubbly, and Petit Pouce, resigned to spending, ordered another bottle, for, as he was going to take a train at five, it wasn’t any use going to bed.

"You still haven't told us what you're going to do?" he said benevolently to Pierrot.

"Nothing for a bit. But coming back to this chapel, I won't tell you what it is, as it doesn't seem to interest you, but . . ."

"Yes, yes," said Paradis, who'd begun to forget Yvonne, the price of the bottle of bubbly and the sack from the Palace, "tell us, we want to know."

"I met the chap that keeps it. Proper character he is."

"Go on, we're all attention," said Petit Pouce, who, older than the others, sometimes used out-of-date expressions.

"He used to own all the ground where the Park is now. Came to him from his family. He's a real gentleman."

"As you're so clever," said Petit Pouce, "d'you know who the ground belongs to now?"

"Pradonet," said Paradis, who had still not given up hope of becoming the boss's son-in-law.

"Pradonet!" said Petit Pouce in disgust, "that big cow! not likely. I'll bet you don't know who started up the Amusement Park, and how it was done."

"We don't give a sod," said Paradis.

"Tell us," said Pierrot.

Petit Pouce drank some bubbly, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and said:

"There were four of them. Pradonet was the first, of course, it was his idea. He had some Dobbie horses, see, and some dough put by. Then there was Prouillot, his pal. He had the Scenic Railway, and his wife, you know her now as Madame Pradonet, but she's no more his Mrs. than I'm the Pope. . . ."

"How d'you know all this?" asked Paradis.

"Prouillot's dead," Petit Pouce went on, "and his wife, course, came into what he'd got. But that's not all."

"Who's Yvonne the daughter of, then?" asked Pierrot.

"Pradonet and the first wife, one he gave the push to, who now has a shop Rue du Pont."

"I get it," said Pierrot.

"You get what?" asked Petit Pouce.

"But how d'you know?" Paradis demanded.

"The third partner," continued Petit Pouce, "was Perdrix, whom you all know, the silly git. He hadn't a big share and still hasn't. The fourth was a geezer name of Ponsoult, uncle of Pradonet's so-called missis. He owns the land."

"Ah, I sec," said Pierrot, "he's the one Mounnezergues sold it to."

"Mounnezergues?"

"Yes, the man who looks after the grave of the Poldavian prince."

"Poldavian prince?"

So Pierrot told them what he knew about the chapel, the Poldavians and their princes.

The others listened. They liked hearing stories, and were, anyway, in a bit of a daze. Paradis no longer knew where he was. Petit Pouce thought it added to his store of general knowledge, this bit of ancient history; he was also glad to see the night slipping by; it would soon be time to catch his train to Palinsac.

Pierrot told them all he knew, near enough anyway, except for some small details that he'd forgotten. Then all three drank, and Petit Pouce, to change his ideas, proposed

a go on the pin-table. There was a beauty at the Universal, one where, if you scored a thousand, a bathing-girl lit up. Pierrot accepted enthusiastically, and Paradis languidly, but the café-proprietor objected that it was five to two and he wanted to close. The match was put off till another day and the waiter came up. Petit Pouce, remembering he'd ordered one of the bottles, pulled his wallet from his inside pocket, but he didn't take anything out, he wanted to see what Paradis would do. And Paradis did what Petit Pouce had so cleverly foreseen : he lent him a hundred francs.

Then they went to another café to have one for the road. Petit Pouce went home afterwards, packed his bag, and, leaving his wife half-asleep and not in a responsive mood, took the five o'clock train for Palinsac.

6

PIERROT WAS wakened at seven o'clock by the chambermaid. She'd just seen a headline saying in big letters that the Amusement Park had that night been burned down. Pierrot heard this news with lively interest, though he was scared a moment for Yvonne; but no casualties were mentioned. The paper ended up by informing its readers that the cause of this conflagration was unknown, but that specialists had been called in to deal with the problem.

"Well, you're out of a job, Monsieur Pierrot," said the maid, who thought he was still employed there.

She looked at him with sympathy and compassion. His head only showed above the sheets; underneath, he was naked as the day he was born. As he'd been to bed late, having drunk more than usual, he had difficulty in keeping his eyes open.

"I'm afraid so," he answered, "I'd better go and see what happened."

But he'd no real desire to rush to the scene of the disaster, and when he said "I'm getting up," it was only so the maid would leave the room. Having obtained this result, he closed his eyes again and went bye-byes for another

hour. He felt this supplementary dose of sleep was necessary.

He accompanied his toilet with, and put his clothes on to, the spasmodic whistling of popular tunes. It wasn't until after his morning coffee that he judged it necessary and perhaps urgent to see what the Amusement Park looked like after a night of combustion. He went there that morning, but without really putting his best foot forward, and without any of the agitation common to less resigned souls, unprepared for the tricks of fate.

He followed his habitual itinerary, and, as was his custom, stopped before the ball-bearings shop. He never gave this mechanical entertainment a miss. Then he advanced into the Avenue Chaillot and saw first of all that the Chair-o-Planes had disappeared. Some of the stalls were still smouldering, police mounting guard over the debris. People were getting together to talk it over and get a better view.

The stucco women had taken the hell of a pasting. In one night they had aged fifty years. Their hair was all burned off, and their breasts were down on their thighs. They'd also changed their race. Substantial black bottoms gave them the air of steatopygous hottentots.

Like the Chair-o-Planes, the superstructure of the Scenic Railway had also collapsed.

Pierrot joined a group of commentators, among whom he recognized several philosophers. A great big fat geezer was saying to a little old boy :

"It's a real disaster. And d'you know, sir, how it happened ?"

"A short circuit. . . ."

Another individual, talking a few yards away, rushed up to them at that, waving his arms :

“ Nothing of the sort, sir, nothing of the sort. I saw it all. I live over there.”

He pointed into space.

“ I saw it from my window. It was arson ! ”

‘ They didn’t expect that.

“ Here’s what happened. My stomach was upset that night. Some tinned fish I ate must have been bad. It gave me a headache, not to mention diarrhoea, and, as I couldn’t sleep, I was half-stifling, I stood at my window and my window, sir, looks out over there.”

He pointed in the same direction as before.

“ I’ve a wonderful view over the Park. Noisy, of course, but still . . . Naturally, all the lights were out. It was nearly three a.m. I was drinking in the night air, it was doing me good, when all of a sudden those aeroplanes started up, flew off the ground, and went round and round. I was looking on astounded, when, better still, they burst into flame. I can tell you, it was a marvellous sight. I couldn’t get over it. But the best was when they fell off one by one, in various parts of the Park, starting fires everywhere. That was worth paying any money to see. By Christ, yes, I’ll say. Before you could count ten, the whole of the Park was ablaze, then several moments later huge flames shot up, and with a shower of sparks and with an infernal din, gentlemen, the whole framework of the switchback railway came clattering down. It was that instant that I realized I was assisting at one of the most terrible fires of modern times.”

“ Why ? ” asked Pierrot. “ Did you think at first it was a flood ? ”

Everyone thought this an excellent crack, and Pierrot was quite pleased with it himself, as he didn't often pull off quite such good ones. He hadn't got it in him, and he just threw that one out without realising what he was doing.

Having considered for a few seconds the possibility of an immediate and savage revenge, such as breaking both his glasses and thirty-two teeth, cutting his jugular or stamping on his solar plexus, the other, all things taken into account, decided to let it pass.

"It's all right for you to laugh," he went on, "but you didn't see what I saw. It was really staggering: flames as high as houses, smoke belching out everywhere; and anyhow it was a crime, arson. You can't tell me those aeroplanes started to go round and fall off all on their own. I saw it, I wasn't dreaming."

As he seemed to be almost in a frenzy, the people listening didn't dare to put forward any other version. Instead, they commented on his. Who? Why? How? A post-mortem was held. The owner? An enemy? Revenge? Insurance money? What had happened at the Palace of Laughter the previous evening was brought up again. Several hypotheses were put forward, but to each someone raised an objection. Pierrot listened with interest, then he thought suddenly that he might find something out for himself.

First of all he wanted to make sure that Mlle. Pradonet's house had not been destroyed. He went up the street outside. Fire-engines were stationed all along the sidewalk, and firemen were spraying some debris that showed signs of wishing once more to burst into flame. Knots of people were lounging about here and there, looking on curiously; from time to time the police sent

them packing, but they only stopped a little farther on. At the corner of the street the fire hadn't done so much damage ; some discussions were going on there too, but nobody knew much. Pierrot looked up, thinking perhaps to see Yvonne at a window, but no one appeared, not even a maid beating a carpet. He continued on round the side of the Amusement Park and into the Rue des Larmes. He was glad to see the chapel had been spared. As he was passing it, he saw Mounnezergues coming out of his house.

" Well, young man," he cried from the other side of the street, " we're in luck. The fire stopped a few yards away from the tomb ! "

He crossed the pavement and seized Pierrot's mitt, radiating cordiality.

" I saw the whole thing," he continued, " a grandiose spectacle, sir ! I was afraid for the prince, but the wind changed just in time. The whole square is in cinders, except for this."

He pointed to the chapel.

" You can imagine how pleased I am. Not that I congratulate myself upon the catastrophe, although . . . Anyhow, I've already told you what I think about that. But what I'm wondering is what Pradonet's going to do now. Pradonet's the owner."

" I know," said Pierrot, " I worked for him."

" Really ? " said Mounnezergues. " What did you do ? "

" I stuck women in a draught in the Palace of Laughter, but I only stayed on one night. Then another night as assistant to a fakir. That's all."

Mounnezergues seemed satisfied with this answer.

"But didn't they already try to burn the Palace of Laughter down yesterday evening?" he asked.

"So it seems. My two mates got the sack."

"Revenge, perhaps?"

Pierrot didn't understand, as Mounnezergues could see.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"What about?"

"The fire."

He indicated what was left of the Amusement Park.

"I don't give a curse," said Pierrot.

He smiled, for suddenly he realized that Yvonne wouldn't have to be at her stall any more. Now she'd be able, he hoped, to have a date with him some time, even if she was walking out with Paradis.

But Mounnezergues continued:

"D'you think it just happened, or did somebody do it?"

"I've no idea."

And having thought it over:

"Any case it wasn't me."

"Nor me," said Mounnezergues, "although they may suspect me, since I've a motive. But how could I have done it? Perhaps a short circuit—explains everything; or perhaps Pradonct's in difficulties, and was counting on the insurance to put his affairs in order?"

"I don't know about that," said Pierrot. "As for how it happened, I heard a queer cove at the main gate saying he saw the planes catch fire and come off as they were going round. It's them that helped to spread the fire. But what I don't understand, is why you say you've a motive for starting the fire."

" Oh, don't worry about that, young man. A court of law would never concede that it was strong enough for a conviction. To make myself clear, I'd have to tell you all about my relations with your ex-employer. But there's one thing I'm glad about, and that's my motive. . . . But keep it to yourself. Will you swear to do that on your oath ? "

Pierrot spat on the ground.

" Cross my heart and hope to die," he said.

" Well, it's this," said Mounnezergues, " now Prince Luigi will be able to sleep in peace. Haven't you ever thought that it was indecent to have an Amusement Park so close to a sepulchre? Henceforth the last rest of the Prince will no longer be troubled by music blaring, women screaming and roundabouts turning."

" But won't Pradonet rebuild ? " suggested Pierrot.

" There, you see, it's not a good motive ! As for the planes catching fire, it's a fantasy. I never saw anything like that, and I was awakened by the first sounds. I think somehow I'd been waiting for this. I was asleep, my window open onto the Park. It was about three or half-past, and the flames woke me up, like the dawn or a cock crowing. But there were no aeroplanes going round that I could see."

Pierrot, not knowing how to continue the conversation, stood there in silence. After a pause Mounnezergues continued :

" One could suspect, of course, the people who tried to burn down the Palace of Laughter last night : perhaps that started them off. They got a taste for fire-raising, eh ? Or else one might suspect employees who'd been sacked, like yourself or your friends. Or some rival, who knows ? The

proprietor of the circus that has just been put up across the road. That reminds me, I must go over and shake hands with an old friend of mine who works there. Come with me, young man, I'll introduce you to some interesting people. You might do yourself some good, might even find a job. You're doing nothing at the moment, are you ? ”

“ No,” said Pierrot, “ I'm looking around.”

“ Well, come along.”

Mounnezergues had finished his usual tour of the chapel and the adjoining garden. He went in to fetch his hat. Then he and Pierrot walked on down the road, passing on their left the ruins of the Dance Pavilion.

All seemed quiet at the circus. Mounnezergues hailed an employee who was brushing down a zebra. He asked him where Psermis was. The other answered that Psermis was out, or rather hadn't come in yet, as he lodged at an hotel. And what about his assistant, Burmah ? He was looking after the animals.

“ Don't you know Psermis ? ” Mounnezergues asked Pierrot. “ No ? Haven't you ever been to the circus, then ? ”

No. Pierrot usually went to the flicks. He hadn't the slightest idea who Psermis was, nor Burmah, who Mounnezergues and he later dug out from a corner of the menagerie.

“ He's a very old friend,” Mounnezergues said, “ one of the only ones I have left. I knew him when he was at the Anatomical Hall my father used to supply with wax figures. He was only eighteen at the time and he already had a booth in which to exhibit his indecencies. And d'you know what, I met him later as a sergeant in the Hussars, when I was serving my time in North Africa. That's where he began to

think of training animals : he studied snake-charmers and even taught a bear to walk on stilts, which nobody but he had ever done. This first success encouraged him to continue and when he returned to France he took up this profession seriously. As you don't seem to know, he became the most famous showman of performing animals in two hemispheres. I say showman, since his world-wide success enables him, now, to buy fully-trained animals."

At the entrance to the menagerie they were told Burmah had just gone out. They turned about.

"That's a nuisance," said Mounnezergues, "I'd have liked you to meet Psermis, he might have found you a job. How would you like to work in a travelling circus?"

"I'd rather stay in Paris," answered Pierrot, "but a little job for two-three weeks'd be just what I want at present, especially while the circus is here."

Naturally, he was thinking of Yvonne ; he'd be practically living on her doorstep.

"You mustn't be too choosy," said Mounnezergues.

Mounnezergues was now quite ready to consider Pierrot as his son. He liked him. It'd taken him like that. He had so few friends, ascetic as he was of body and mind. Looking at Pierrot out of the corner of his eye, he began to cherish the germ of a thought : the thought that Pierrot might succeed him as custodian of the tomb, in fact to make Pierrot his heir.

While he pursued this train of thought Mounnezergues, meanwhile, asked everybody in the circus in turn if they could tell him where to find Psermis. Several people did not reply, but the Human Skeleton put forward as a likely haunt the pub on the corner of the Avenue Chaillot. They

didn't have to go as far as that, for in the street outside they encountered Psermis.

"That's him," said Mounnezergues, pointing out a tall, dried-up and grizzled joker who advanced with his hands in his pockets, whistling a smutty tune. Pierrot spotted him as the freak he had last seen perorating before the main gate of the Amusement Park. And I've already made an enemy of him, thought Pierrot; he hoped the other would fail to recognize him.

"Psermis!" cried Mounnezergues, throwing his arms wide.

The showman stopped in his stride to take in the situation. The tune he was whistling stopped too. A few moments passed. Time held these two protagonists at opposite ends of an elastic thread. The thread slackened suddenly and Psermis lunged forward towards Mounnezergues. They fell into one another's arms.

"If it isn't old Mounnezergues!" Psermis was shouting.

They were banging each other on the back and laughing abundantly.

"I was just coming to look you up," said Psermis. "I knew you lived somewhere round here, but I'd lost your address. Bad luck. Good old Mounnezergues! Remember the old days in the Third, and Constantine? Agi mena! Chouia barka!" He was roaring with laughter. "Agi mena! Chouia barka! And the camels, remember? Good old Mounnezergues!"

He looked at Pierrot.

"This your son?"

"Not at all. You know very well I never married."

The other¹ hissed in his ear :

“ Youthful indiscretion ? ”

“ No, no, of course not. He’s a young man who works in the Amusement Park and who enjoys talking to me.”

“ Then he’s now out of work ? ”

“ Exactly. D’you know anything that would suit him in the circus ? ” Psermis thought for a bit, or pretended to.

“ There’s nothing for the moment, but I’ll let you know if something turns up.”

Having thus played the role of employer with an almost classic perfection, Psermis returned to an earlier theme, evoking anew Constantine, the Third Hussars, and the camels of Biskra, a place famous also for its dates. Mounnezergues replied in kind. Pierrot pretty soon got bored. He managed to get away without difficulty, despite the friendship that Mounnezergues now felt for him but which was now temporarily eclipsed while the old man listened to the sly echoes of his youth.

“ I’ll let you know if I think of anything,” Psermis shouted after him.

Pierrot wondered how.

He walked away.

As it was round about noon the Universal seemed indicated. Again Pierrot went round the Amusement Park, outside which people were standing about. In the buses going by heads were craned to look at the debris, the cinders and charred wood.

Pierrot hoped to see Paradis or Petit Pouce, but neither of them was in the café. He ordered a drink at the counter, then went over to the pin-table and, having dropped a coin in the slot, started to play. A group of regulars were talking

at the cash-desk : about the fire, of course. In front of the tote some horse-fanciers were queueing up.

Pierrot lost. No doubt the owner of the table, seeing that he won too often, had come in the day before to make some adjustments to the machine and spoil his game. Pierrot finished his drink, listening to the conversation around him, not that he learned anything from it, since some believed in the short circuit and others said the police were looking into the case.

Since neither Paradis nor Petit Pouce appeared, Pierrot ate a stand-up lunch : a sandwich. He passed the rest of his day on the river bank ; he even treated himself to a bathe, and swam conscientiously. Both coming and going, he kept a sharp eye on the window of Pradonet's house, but without seeing a soul.

That evening at the Universal the pals didn't turn up either. Pierrot dined at a restaurant where they didn't even have paper napkins on the table, probably because the *cuisine* was billed as *bourgeoise*. Afterwards he went to a cinema, where by an odd coincidence they were showing a film about the fire of London. Then he walked back to his hotel. During this journey, the thought occurred to him that he had to find some work. This thought struck him faster than lightning, but he didn't dwell on it ; most of the time he thought of Yvonne, and sometimes about nothing at all.

During the following days, four in number, he made this same journey to and fro from the hotel, with a detour to take in the Amusement Park. He didn't see Yvonne or his friends, however hard he looked ; nor did he see Mounnezergues or Psermis, because he took care to avoid

them. On the evening of the fourth day, still without love or friends, as he was returning slowly along the river bank, where he'd seen anglers and swimmers sharing a mutual pleasure so full that there was even some left over for the lorry-drivers who, despite their strict schedule, stopped at the corner café to have one for the road before entering or leaving Paris ; and as he was considering the allegorical implications contained in this picture, Pierrot suddenly felt himself struck by the same lightning-like thought that'd hit him four days before : in other words, that it was time he scouted around to find some way of earning his bread, for he wasn't too flush and what funds he had were now sadly depleted by the idiotic bolting of a heavily backed favourite, unnerved by the sudden opening of a scarlet parasol on the course. From theory, however, it was necessary to return to practice. Pierrot surveyed his prospects : a distant cousin that he'd been to before in a similarly difficult situation would no doubt find him a job in the Paris Fair ; a former employer would perhaps take him back selling insurance on commission ; there were the want-ads in the newspapers ; various people could be applied to. Pierrot thought it better to visit, first of all, Old Man Mounnezergues.

This latter was smoking a pipe at his window. He was long-sighted and had already spotted Pierrot as soon' as he turned the street corner ; so he had time to conceal his joy ; he wanted to tell the young man his news calmly, the news that he'd found him a job. Pierrot who could see pretty well too, thanks to the strength and thickness of his spectacles, felt the other was examining him and advanced even more slowly than usual. But at a reasonable distance he

smiled pleasantly and touched two fingers to the brim of his hat. Mounnezergues called out to him :

“Come in ! I was hoping to see you ! Don’t knock ! The door’s open. Turn right and up the passage. I’ll wait for you here.”

“Thanks, Monsieur Mounnezergues,” said Pierrot.

Better to thank him in advance, he thought, imagining himself, without enthusiasm, already sweeping up horse-dung on the circus track. Of course he wasn’t obliged to accept Mounnezergues’ offer. Crossing the garden he more or less decided he didn’t want to be trapped into working for a travelling circus. As he entered the house his mind was definitely made up. A life that might lead so far from Yvonne didn’t appeal to him at all.

Mounnezergues was waiting for him at the end of the passage. He was smiling. Pierrot was surprised to see how young he’d got in the last few days. He came forward, removing politely but firmly his soft felt hat.

“I was looking round for work, that’s why I haven’t been to see you lately,” he said.

Mounnezergues continued to smile, but didn’t answer. Pierrot stopped, hardly daring to hold out his hand ; the old man’s immobility and silence seemed to foreshadow some declaration so portentous that it forbade the banality of an everyday greeting ; but as he had good reason to suppose that this declaration concerned an engagement for him (for Pierrot) in the travelling circus, he thought it more tactful to let Mounnezergues assume that, despite his attachment to his native town, he felt no repugnance in following the itinerary of the establishment in question.

"The other day," he began with a feigned diffidence, which he imagined to be expected from him in the circumstances, "that gentleman, your friend, said perhaps he'd be able to find something for me to do. . . . I came to see if . . . It's hard to find work these days . . . As you seemed to take an interest in me I wondered whether . . ."

But Mounnezergues smiled on without speaking; he seemed determined to force Pierrot into a more definite avowal of distress. So Pierrot rushed into the breach:

"I came to see if there were any jobs going for me at the circus."

"Ah, there you are!" said a voice behind him. "I wondered what'd become of you."

It was Mounnezergues. Pierrot turned and saw him.

"This," said Mounnezergues, indicating the waxen figure, "I made ten years ago for my own amusement. A funny joke, as you might put it. But do come in."

Pierrot obeyed, rather relieved to have been interviewed for the past few minutes by a waxwork dummy.

"What'll you have?" Mounnezergues asked him. "Liqueur?"

"Thanks," said Pierrot.

A large portrait hung on the wall in front of him.

"Prince Luigi," said Mounnezergues, filling their glasses. "It was done from a snapshot in the newspapers of the time. A good resemblance. An artist did it. Once I'd the idea of doing a wax head of him. I managed a very good one. I kept it for about three months, then I melted it down again. Thought perhaps it showed a lack of respect for the prince. But never mind all that. How d'you like the liqueur? Good?"

“ Yes, Monsieur Mounnezergues.”

“ Monsieur ? No need for formalities where we’re concerned. But that’s what I had to tell you. I’ve found you a little job, only for a few days, it’s true, but it’s always something, and you’ll like it, I’m sure.”

Only for a few days. That wasn’t too bad.

“ Thank you,” said Pierrot. “ Thank you, Monsicur M . . . ”

“ No more monsieurs, blast it ! ” cried Mounnezergues.

Pierrot was curious to know what sort of work Mounnezergues thought he’d like. But a ring came at the door.

Mounnezergues leaned out of the window to see who it was.

“ It’s Pradonet,” he told Pierrot.

“ I’d better go,” said Pierrot. “ I’ll come back another time.”

“ No, no, my boy, please stay ; I want you to.”

And he rushed to open the door.

Pierrot went to the window in his turn. From this vantage point he could see not only the chapel and the garden surrounding it, but the huge field of cinders and charred debris that had been the Amusement Park. Twisted, blackened, cooked to a turn, the struts of the Scenic Railway, menacing a serene sky, seemed alone to bear witness to the tragedy. The rest did not seem much more sordid than when it had been masquerading in the guise of Entertainment, and was almost as agreeable to the eye. It was now possible to add to the outlook the excitement of a Treasure Hunt : this used to be the Helter Skelter, this the fortune-teller’s gaff, and so on. Pierrot was looking for the

site of the Machine-gun Gallery when Pradonet entered the room. He turned round.

"Come in," Mounnezergues was saying, "don't mind this young man. We can speak freely before him. A liqueur?"

"Very welcome," said Pradonet.

Having considered Pierrot, who had nodded to him politely, he added :

"I seem to have met him somewhere before, this boy."

And to Pierrot :

"Haven't we already met, young man? I'm Pradonet, the owner of the Amusement Park."

"I used to work there," said Pierrot ; "that's perhaps where you saw me."

"Could be," said Pradonet.

He examined Pierrot a bit more closely, but without being able to make up his mind. He turned to Mounnezergues :

"I've got to talk to you seriously," he said.

"I'm listening," said Mounnezergues ; "try your liqueur."

"This young man's in my way," said Pradonet ; "can't you tell him to go?"

"I'll be off, Monsieur Mounnezergues," said Pierrot.

"Not at all, you stay there, my boy," Mounnezergues told him, adding to Pradonet : "You can talk freely, as I've said before. This is my adopted son. I've nothing to hide from him."

This declaration stupefied Pradonet. He said nothing for a moment, wondering if this could make any change in their respective positions.

"Have you really adopted him?" he asked Mounnezergues. "He comes into everything you've got?"

"Indubitably."

"But only a year ago you told me you'd no heirs."

"Well, I've got one now."

"No, no, no," shouted Pradonet, "I won't stand for that. You've messed me about enough over this ground already, saying you'd no heirs, and here one suddenly turns up from God knows where."

"That," said Mounnezergues, "is my affair. My private life's no business of yours, is it? All I can advise you, is to take into account, when making your calculations in future, that an heir exists."

"Damn funny way of going about things," said Pradonet, who'd begun to glare angrily at Pierrot.

Pierrot smiled back at him amiably.

"By the way," said Mounnezergues, "what about this fire?"

"You ought've seen it," said Pradonet very proudly, "what a catastrophe! Razed to the ground! But I'm insured."

"Will the insurance people pay up?" asked Mounnezergues.

"Why not? They're investigating at the moment. But it doesn't matter what comes out, I'll be paid all right."

"You don't seem to be wondering much how it caught fire," remarked Mounnezergues.

"That's where you're wrong. I've thought about it a lot."

"And what conclusion have you reached?"

"None," said Pradonet. "But anyway I didn't do it. The insurance people'll pay up, and with this money and some more I'll get I'll build a Park that'll not only be a fair but a monument. And that's why I've come here today, Mounnezergues. Because for my monument to be a real monument, it's got to be all squared up; and to get it all squared up, Mounnezergues, I got to have your ground, and that chapel's got to go."

"No," said Mounnezergues.

"Now look, Mounnezergues, the future Amusement Park will have seven floors, and they'll each be sixteen feet high. On each floor there'll be entertainments, sideshows, everything. And a Scenic Railway will run right through the whole establishment. And there'll be a roof-garden, a swimming-pool, a dance floor, and a tower for parachute-jumping. And all that's not much, I can tell you, compared with what I'll think up later. So you can see it'll be unique, people'll come specially to Paris to see it. There'll be nothing like it in the whole wide world. And because of a Poldavian prince you want to stop me from realizing this project? And deprive Paris of its greatest spectacle? No, Mounnezergues, you can't do it. For me, for Paris, for France, I ask you to reconsider your decision."

"Bosh," said Mounnezergues.

"You're a . . ." said Pradonet, "you're a . . ." said Pradonet, "you're a . . ." said Pradonet, "a madman. Yes, that's it, a madman."

He had risen and was flinging his huge arms about at the risk of breaking the ornaments or knocking the portrait of the prince off its hook. Then he sat down again and drank up his liqueur.

“Not bad,” he said, very calm. “Anyway, Mounnezergues, think over my proposition. I offer you 200,000 francs, half in cash, half in six months. That suit?”

“No,” said Mounnezergues.

Pradonet sighed.

He looked dreamily into his empty glass, then got up. He shook Mounnezergues’ hand, saying, “We’ll talk it over again,” and he also shook hands absent-mindedly with Pierrot.

He went out.

Waiting for the return of Mounnezergues, who’d taken his visitor to the door, Pierrot considered the portrait of the prince. It was certainly a work of art, no doubt a good likeness, the hair and eyelashes done in with a camel-hair brush, good as a photograph. As to the subject himself, he must’ve been a handsome fellow, looked a bit of a rake as well. On due reflection Pierrot didn’t much care for the look of him, and it wasn’t until he remembered that this poor young man had died in the flower of his youth because of a stupid accident that he forgave him his sideboards, his flashing eyes, his general air of a South American Joe. And he conceded that Mounnezergues should continue looking after his tomb with the same, though inexplicable, fidelity to a cause.

“Poor boy, eh?” said Mounnezergues, returning, “to die like that in the flower of his youth. What a pity! You’re asking yourself, no doubt, why I should be so attached to someone whom I never knew until he was dying to the point of refusing for his sake a large sum of money—by the way, d’you see how I choked off Pradonet? I gave him his answer all right!—let’s see, what was I saying?”

“ You were imagining that I’m astonished to see you so devoted to the cause of the Poldavian prince.”

“ Why ‘ imagining ’ ? Wasn’t that what you were thinking ? ”

“ I mind my own business,” said Pierrot, “ it’s like the talk you had with Pradonet. If you want me to forget it, I will. In fact, I won’t remember it at all, if that suits you better.”

Mounnezergues surveyed him seriously.

“ You’re a funny chap, aren’t you ? I only meant to say that if you wanted me to answer the question that I thought you were going to ask me, I wasn’t going to, so there ! ”

“ I didn’t come here to upset you,” said Pierrot.

“ You’re a good boy,” said Mounnezergues absently.

He was thinking.

“ Ah ! ” he cried, “ your new job. Pradonet interrupted us. You like the idea ? ”

“ Oh, yes, of course,” said Pierrot, “ but what is it ? ”

“ Didn’t I tell you ? ”

“ You said it would only last a few days.”

“ Of course. Well, have you a driving licence ? ”

“ Bet your life,” said Pierrot.

“ I didn’t think you had. Could you drive a lorry ? ”

“ Try me,” said Pierrot.

“ Well, here’s what you’ve got to do. I told you about Psermis. You even met him. I told you he was a showman of trained animals. He buys them from trainers, principally Voussois, who lives down south. Sometimes the animals won’t do. This is what happened with the last lot he sent. You’ve got to take these beasts back to Voussois, and you’ll

bring a new lot back for Psermis. He's being lent a lorry. It's this that you'll drive. In fact, it'll be a little holiday for you."

"And do I get paid for it?"

"Handsomely even. But you'll only be employed for eight days."

"It's always something," said Pierrot, who, at this, felt the sentiment known as gratitude.

He was not, of course, thinking of being Mounnczergue's heir.

7

SOME DAYS later, on the Route Nationale, Pierrot was driving the circus truck as hard as he could. He'd left Paris at seven a.m. and hoped to arrive at Butanges for lunch. Now he was out of the suburbs and breathing in the good fresh country air, constantly poisoned, of course, by the cars and lorries whose speed was superior to his. And these were legion. All the same, he felt happy, he was humming popular tunes. Next to him, Mesange, his cap pushed back and well wrapped up in sheepskin, contemplated the country, staring straight in front of him. From time to time he turned to Pierrot, who gave him, when this happened, his most charming smile. Next to Mesange, Pistolet, leaning out of the window, was also examining carefully the landscape which offered itself to his gaze. In the back of the truck all was quiet, and even at level-crossings or uneven bits in the road Pierrot heard no complaints. As he hardly knew how to drive, he wasn't sorry that his truck was only an old tin liz. He could step on the accelerator without doing more than forty. He saw himself constantly overtaken without hate or envy, and took a silent pleasure in everything he saw that seemed to him nice: a good straight road, a winding road, houses and allotments, quiet

little villages and philosophic cows out to grass ; not counting Mesange and Pistolet, whom he liked very much.

Towards noon he was still a long way from Butanges. He stopped by the wayside to have a jimmy riddle and at the same time consult his road-map. He'd be late on his schedule in any case, and decided to stop for lunch at the next place on his route, which was called Saint-Mouezysur-Eon. He found in the market place an inn which seemed to him all right, and parked his vehicle behind a gigantic lorry. He looked inside the truck : nobody had suffered from the effects of the journey but everyone was hungry. Pierrot consulted the instructions given him by Psermis, distributed food in accordance with these, and didn't forget to dish out drink. By this time, all sorts of people, children and adults had spotted the presence of Mesange, who was now sitting at the wheel ; they didn't know what to think, but were prepared to laugh.

When he'd done with feeding the others Pierrot entered the tavern and, having said good day, inquired after a possible meal for himself. Yes, he could be fed. He ordered a table for three, and went to fetch his two companions, who jumped gaily to the ground. The crowd round the truck also demonstrated a certain gaiety. A sudden silence fell when they entered the café, and seeing them sitting down all three at a table, everybody stared dumb-founded.

Pierrot leaned forward over his plate with great satisfaction : he was hungry. Mesange, having thrown his overcoat into a corner, sat down opposite, while Pistolet took up his position between the two of them. As for the people

staring, they consisted (excluding the waitress and an enormous matron shaking with fat behind the counter) of the driver of the gigantic lorry and his mate, a messenger from a big store in uniform, with his driver (Pierrot hadn't noticed their car), a cyclist who hadn't taken the clips off his trousers, and a stout gentleman, evidently from the locality, who looked as though he were going hunting. All these people stared at the trio without saying a word. Pierrot pretended not to notice their sustained attention.

The waitress came up.

"Is it for lunch?" she asked in a voice choked with emotion.

"No," said Pierrot, "it's for dinner. But today we're dining early. Right now, as a matter of fact."

Mesange seemed to appreciate the joke, and aimed at the waitress a lugubrious but roguish stare, which baffled her completely.

She stammered :

"Yes, sir."

Pierrot looked at the menu and asked:

"Is all this on?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then," said he, "we'll all have hors-d'oeuvres to start off with, then tripe for me, then for this gentleman" (he indicated Mesange) "steak and onions—how's that?" he asked him (Mesange banged several times on the table with his fist as a sign that it suited him)—"and for him" (Pierrot indicated Pistolet) "a double portion of soup, with carrots and turnips in it: he's a vegetarian. Isn't that so, old cock?" he asked Pistolet, who didn't answer,

indifferent, no doubt, as to whether or not he fitted into this category.

The waitress stood rooted, like a fool.

"A bottle of red for me," added Pierrot, "and water for these gentlemen."

The waitress went away in despair. She went over to talk to the proprietress.

Meanwhile Pierrot was rubbing his hands in anticipation, Mesange was busily wiping his plate, and Pistolet, having succeeded in pulling the cruet towards him, was shaking the salt out and eating it up bit by bit.

Soon the waitress came back, bringing a message which she formulated in the following terms :

"We'll serve you with lunch," she told Pierrot, "but the mistress, she says she won't let animals eat out of the crockery people eat out of."

"Soppy fool," said Pierrot.

"Here, who're you talking to?" says the girl.

"You, you sloppy mare. Go and tell your missis we'll all three stuff ourselves, and we'll have proper service and we'll eat off proper plates, not out of troughs, and that'll do anyhow, I'm paying."

He tapped his chest on the place occupied by his wallet.

"It's not because of you she said that," the waitress went on, "but because of them. We'll catch some disease with animals eating off the plates, bound to."

"And what about you?" Pierrot cracked back in a low voice. "What animal did you catch your smallpox from?"

He pinched her BTM, and Mesange undid her apron-strings from behind, swift as light.

“ Now,” said Pierrot, “ let’s have it, and quick.”

She went away again, but this time in the direction of the kitchen, where the proprietor was. Mesange watched her disappear through the doorway, and, turning to Pierrot, held out his hand, to congratulate him, no doubt, on the firmness with which he had handled the situation. Pierrot, of course, shook hands with him. The people at the other tables remained as though struck dumb and without moving : astonishment was writ large on every countenance. Outside, young nippers were trying to peer in through the windows. Mesange, having seen them, made a few faces to express his contempt. Then he started eating the mustard, but the first spoonful appearing to him to be in the nature of a practical joke, he tried to throw the mustard pot at a mirror, in which he seemed to see reflected a second Mesange. Pierrot stopped this in time. The other, frustrated, glared at him ferociously : he was getting into a bad temper. Pierrot got hold of a water carafe, determined to bash in Mesange’s head if he showed signs of carrying out the nasty plans he seemed to have in mind. Luckily the waitress at the moment appeared from the kitchen with the hors-d’œuvres. Mesange turned his attention to her ; his bad humour evaporated. Pierrot’s mouth watered. Pistolet during this time had not moved.

“ I brought enough for all of you,” said the girl.

“ That’s what I ordered,” replied Pierrot, helping his two companions to food, being careful however to fill Pistolet’s plate with vegetable substances only.

Mesange, manipulating his knife and fork skilfully, attacked his share voraciously, as did Pierrot. Pistolet, having sniffed his plate suspiciously, looked round at the

people present (whom his glance seemed to disquiet not a little), looked the waitress over from top to toe with a dull and beady eye, then started to crack celery and radishes between his teeth, which were as strong as they were yellow.

"What's your name?" Pierrot asked the waitress, who was still standing there gaping at the trio.

"Mathurine, sir."

"Well, Mathurine," said Pierrot, "get on out, we want to be alone, understand? When we want anything else we'll ring."

"Very good, sir," and she fled.

The spectators took this injunction to themselves and tried to appear normal and detached. The two blokes from the gigantic lorry finished their coffee, paid and left. The stout gentleman who seemed about to go hunting went too. Two rather dim characters entered, arguing the toss, and without noticing Pierrot's table. The restaurant returned gradually to its everyday atmosphere. Then Mathurine brought the tripe, the steak and onions and some vegetable soup for Pistolet. Later cheese was tucked into, and fruit completed the feast. Pierrot ordered coffee, but not for the two others. Mesange accepted this deprivation with a good grace, for he didn't like coffee. The ban on wine was harder for him to bear, but he was only allowed coloured water. Pistolet showed no signs of getting out of hand.

Pierrot, while he emptied his bottle of red, felt his interior twilight crossed from time to time by philosophical reflections, such as: "life's good if you don't weaken," or else, "Life is sweet," or, on another theme, "Life's

dead funny," or else, "What a funny thing life is." A few bursts of sentimentality rocketed up in him at the memory of Yvonne, then fell down with a shower of sparks. A romantic searchlight swept his sky from time to time, metaphorically of course, and Pierrot, shaking his head, murmured: "It's like being at the ruddy flicks." And he smiled at his two friends, who seemed to like him more and more. After all, they'd only met that morning.

As Mathurine was bringing the coffee, the proprietor came out of his kitchen and, having saluted the cyclist and the two store men, whom he knew no doubt, marched firmly over to the three circus people.

"Well," he asked, "how was it?"

"Not too bad, not too bad," said Pierrot.

"And these . . . gentlemen? . . . Are they satisfied?"

"You satisfied?" Pierrot asked them.

They both nodded their heads solemnly.

"Good; good," said the innkeeper, "it isn't every day I have the honour to entertain distinguished guests like yourselves. Allow me to offer you a glass of kirsch. Mathurine! The bottle of kirsch, my own bottle, and two glasses."

"I think we'd better offer Mesange some," said Pierrot, "I don't want him to take against us."

"*Three* glasses!" cried the innkeeper.

"Old Pistolet's a vegetarian. No meat, no alcohol."

The innkeeper drew up a chair and sat down beside Pistolet, who inspired him with more confidence than Mesange, who was watching him out of slitted eyes.

"That your truck outside?"

"Yes."

“ You’re from the travelling circus ? ”

“ Yes.”

Mathurine brought the kirsch. They touched glasses. Mesange didn’t find it too bad. The innkeeper refilled the glasses.

“ Where’s the circus now ? ” asked the innkeeper.

“ In front of the Amusement Park that burned down. You must’ve read about it in the papers. ”

“ I did,” the innkeeper told him, “ disastrous ! Were any houses burned down as well ? ”

“ No, only the stalls and sideshows went up.”

“ You know the neighbourhood ? ”

“ Bet your life,” said Pierrot.

Pistolet, bored by the conversation, had gone to sleep. Mesange took a cigar from his pocket, lit it, and smoked placidly.

“ You know the little café on the corner of the Rue des Larmes ? ” asked the innkeeper.

“ No,” said Pierrot, “ there isn’t one.”

“ What ! ” said the innkeeper. “ The Café Posidon. That’s my name, Posidon.”

“ No,” said Pierrot, “ it’s no longer there, it’s a garage now.”

“ I might’ve known it,” said the innkeeper, “ everything closes down sooner or later on this earth. Nothing lasts. Everything one saw when one was young has vanished by the time one’s old. One never washes one’s feet twice in the same water. If one says it’s daytime, a few hours later it’s night, and if one says it’s night, a few hours later day breaks. Everything’s moving all the time, nothing stays put. Doesn’t it tire you in the finish ? But I can see you’re

too young to understand what I mean, that you've only to think over the past to see everything's sodding off all around you, or is just about to sod off. But straight up, the Café Posidon's no longer there?"

"That's what I said. Funny, you living on that corner. Quite a meeting! I know all that part very well."

"I kept that café for twenty years. Gave it up five or six years ago."

"Then you know the chapel?" exclaimed Pierrot.

"What chapel?" asked Posidon.

"The Poldavian chapel, in the Rue des Larmes, behind the Amusement Park."

"Don't remember it," said Posidon.

"It's in a little square."

"I don't remember."

"Never mind," said Pierrot.

"You're sure there's a chapel in that street?"

"Never mind," said Pierrot.

He asked for the bill and paid. As Mathurine was walking off, tucking away her tip, Mesange with a quick jerk undid her apron-strings once more.

"All the same, it's funny," said Pierrot, "you living on that corner."

"What I can't understand's this chapel. Are you sure . . . ?"

Pierrot shook hands with him and woke Pistolet, who jumped from his chair. Mesange had gone to fetch his coat.

"So long, lays and gents," said Pierrot.

All three of them went out, and by four that afternoon their truck had passed through Butanges. At five it entered

the forest of Scribe, emerging from there at six. At seven they were in Antony, big industrial centre. Pierrot decided to go on and spend the night at Saint-Flers-sur-Caillavet. He stopped before a certain hotel called the White Horse, which seemed to correspond to his social status. Having parked his vehicle in the garage and inspected its cargo, which seemed to be in good condition and to have weathered the journey well, he went in search of the owner, who turned out to be a tall woman, gaunt rather than thin, who was cashing up behind a glass-fronted desk. While Pierrot was asking her for a room with two beds, the lady, hearing a noise from down below, sat up in her chair and leaned out of her glass tank. She saw Mesange and Pistolet. Mesange took off his hat to her with dignity. Pistolet stared at her indifferently with his dull eyes.

"What about him?" she asked, pointing at Pistolet with a slim, knotted finger.

"I'd like a mattress for him," Pierrot answered.

"He clean?"

"Just as clean as you or me," said Pierrot.

She gave him a skeletal laugh, difficult to interpret.

"Oh, you know," she said, "at my age you can't shock me any longer."

"I wasn't trying," said Pierrot. "Anyway," he added, "what age's that?"

"Get along with you," she giggled.

She pushed a bell. A servant roamed in; she gave a little squeal on seeing the three comrades.

"Room 43 for these gentlemen," said the proprietress, "and put a mattress on the floor."

To Pierrot she added :

“ You dining here ? ”

“ Bet your life,” he answered, “ I’m starving. And my mates, too, eh, boys ? ”

At the prospect of stuffing himself once more Mesange reacted joyously, jumping, with a single supple and graceful movement, onto the counter. He attempted at once to plumb the depths of the inkwell by sticking his fingers in it. Pistolet stood patiently waiting for repast and mattress ; Pierrot had complete confidence in him.

Without emotion the lady held out to Mesange a piece of blotting paper for him to wipe his hands on. Which he did, copiously.

“ No,” she went on, reverting to an earlier stage in the conversation, “ you can’t teach an old horse like me new tricks. Just think that, for the three years it lasted, I was at the paybox of the Freak Show, in the Paris Amusement Park.”

Pierrot thought : it looks like people who’ve lived near that dump are every-ruddy-where along this road.

“ It’s been burned down now,” he told her.

“ I know. Ah, when one gets on in years, there’s nothing much left of one’s youth.”

Blimcy, if they aren’t all alike, thought Pierrot.

“ You’re too young to’ve seen the freaks,” continued the dame. “ Apart from corny types like the bearded lady or the Human Skeleton . . . ”

“ Oh, I’ve met him,” interrupted Pierrot.

“ Which ? The one who’s now at the circus ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ I couldn’t stick him. He was so conceited. Last time

the circus was in the neighbourhood he came to say hello to me. Paturot, that's his name. I wasn't pleased to see him. Between ourselves he was stuck on me once, a proper crush. But I didn't care for him at all. Either you do or you don't, don't you think?"

"Absolutely," said Pierrot, inquiring at that moment where the restaurant was.

Mesange was becoming impatient, and had started to eat the blotting paper graciously proffered to him by the proprietress.

She let them get away, and they entered a room where there were a dozen tables furnished with napkins, flowers, and silver.

"It's going to be dear," thought Pierrot. Then: "Never mind, it looked cheap. It'll all go down on expenses anyway."

Mesange was evidently very impressed by this luxurious atmosphere; Pistolet wasn't. He'd have behaved the same in the Ritz as in a dive.

There was nobody in the dining-room but an N.C.O. of Hussars, whose brilliant uniform intrigued Mesange. This N.C.O. was accompanied by a painted tart. In the background a gentleman on his own showed a thick back and a bull neck. He didn't deign to turn round. As to the soldier and his girl they were too absorbed in each other to be interested for more than a moment in the new arrivals. The waiter looked disgusted. Nevertheless he served them resignedly. Pierrot launched him a big tip at the end of the meal.

The corporal and his conquest had gone. Pistolet was dozing. Mesange was smoking his post-prandial cigar

rather nervously ; it was time for his nightly rest. Pierrot finished his cigarette, wondering vaguely how the three of them would get on in the same room. At the same time he was surprised that the gentleman at the end of the room, who was paying his bill when they arrived, had waited so long without showing any curiosity. Pursuing his investigations in this direction, he saw that a mirror must have revealed to this character his (Pierrot's) identity. He completed his detective work by a careful examination of the individual's back. He came to this conclusion : that he knew the bloke.

He then made to Mesange a series of signs with his eyes and hands. The other understood admirably (gestures are so expressive, using one's vocal chords is really only a luxury!—to such heights the mind of Pierrot managed to rise). Mesange, putting down his cigar carefully in the saucer he was using as an ash-tray, got off his chair, and with a supple, swaying tread, approached the gentleman in question.

He came up silently behind him.

He seized hold of the chair on which the man sat, and with a powerful jerk pulled it away from under him, a little like a waiter whisking away a tablecloth while leaving the table laid as before. The gentleman remained suspended in the air for a split second, then he fell. He got up cursing, while Mesange returned calmly to his seat. His cigar hadn't even had the time to go out. He took it up and savoured a good puff.

" Well," said Pierrot, " why don't you say hello to your old mates ? "

Petit Pouce showed his face.

"That's a bleeding silly trick to play," he told Pierrot.
"I'm talking to *you*," he added immediately.

He quickly and prudently qualified his previous statement, for Mesange had looked round at him, frowning.

"You hiding out or something?" asked Pierrot.

"I didn't see you," said Petit Pouce, deciding now to take it all as a joke. "Safe to sit down with you?"

"These are good geezers," said Pierrot, making introductions. "Mesange, Petit Pouce; Pistolet, Petit Pouce."

"Well, what's been happening to you?" asked Petit Pouce.

"I'm in work again," said Pierrot. "What about you?"

"Bearing up," answered Petit Pouce. "Here, that true, the Amusement Park's been burnt down?"

"That's right, nothing left. But it was all washed up for us there, anyway."

"You haven't been long finding a job, a bloody odd job too, by the looks of things."

"All jobs are bloody odd," said Pierrot.

"But what d'you do exactly?"

Pierrot wondered for a moment how to answer this question, but the other added quickly:

"I see, I see. But I didn't know you went in for that sort of thing."

"I do my best," answered Pierrot modestly. "What about you? You haven't told me anything yet."

Petit Pouce leaned towards him and whispered:

"I'm a detective."

Mesange had also leaned forward, to hear better.

"You joined the bogys, then?" asked Pierrot.

"No, no, private inquiry."

Mesange threw himself back, stubbed his cigar out in the saucer, then ate the butt up, looking at Petit Pouce severely. Pistolet, also disturbed by Petit Pouce's whispering, rubbed his chin on a corner of the table and started to pad silently round the room.

"Don't suppose," said Pierrot, "you can tell me what you're detecting?"

"Not likely, it's confidential, see?"

"Is it about anyone I know?"

"No."

"Do I know anyone who knows them?"

"Yes. Me."

That made them both laugh. The waiter, irritated at their staying on so long after paying the bill, asked them to go into the lounge.

They got up.

"I'll take them up to bed," Pierrot told Petit Pouce, "then I'll join you down here. We'll have a beer together."

"That's right," Petit Pouce agreed.

Pierrot went up to the room he'd booked, and was surprised to find the mattress already laid down. Pistolet understood at once that this was destined for him, and flung himself upon it promptly. Didn't say good night. Shut his eyes and went to sleep. But getting Mesange kipped down was not so easy; having undressed, he tried first one bed, then the other, then back to the first again, leaping from bed to bed. Pierrot, without being too fussy, was all the same a little disgusted at the idea of sleeping in the same sheets as this baboon; then he thought he'd give him the slip, and left the room suddenly, switching off the light behind him. He locked the door.

Down below the lounge was empty. Or almost ; the proprietress was still there, doing something behind the desk.

"Pardon me," Pierrot said to her, "you haven't seen the gentleman who was dining in the restaurant a while back—he's not very tall, rather broad . . ."

"I know who you mean. No, he's gone."

"But isn't he staying here?"

"No, sir. Did you want to speak to him?"

"Yes. He was supposed to be waiting for me. He's a pal of mine. I wonder why he didn't."

"He's done a powder, as they say."

"We worked together at the Amusement Park."

At this the lady showed some animation. She inquired about dates of entry ; she couldn't have known Pierrot, for she must have been before his time ; and as for Petit Pouce, whose length of service the former could only estimate approximately, she didn't remember him.

"I'd have recognized him," she said, "I've a royal memory."

"He's a detective now," said Pierrot.

And suddenly he thought there might be a connection between Petit Pouce's mission and the lady herself. But she didn't seem at all disconcerted.

"I know," she said calmly, "he told me all about it. He's looking for a girl, the one the first love of Pradonet's mistress killed himself for. What a story ! It's Prouillot's widow who put him on the track, but he hasn't found anything yet. He personally thinks the woman never existed. I couldn't tell him anything."

"Couldn't you?" said Pierrot.

“No. D’you know Prouillot’s widow?”

“Not well.”

“Funny woman! I wonder what she thinks about the Park being burned down. And Pradonet. I wonder what he’s going to do.”

“He’s got plans.”

“Who told you?”

“He did.”

“Did he?”

The lady was astonished.

Pierrot told her Pradonet’s plans.

“But,” he concluded, “the Poldavian chapel’s in his way.”

“What on earth’s that, the Poldavian chapel?” the ex-cashier of the Freak Show asked abstractedly.

He gave her some topographical indications, but she couldn’t remember ever having seen the thing. She was much more interested in Pradonet.

“Probably,” she said, “he set fire to it himself.”

“They’re investigating,” said Pierrot. “D’you know Pradonet well?”

“I should say I do. A charming man, witty, intelligent, modest.”

“And capable of arson?” asked Pierrot.

“Anyone’s capable of anything, given the right reasons,” said the hostess, who got up on this, closed her desk and put out the lights. “Good night, my dear.”

He went up to his room, rather disappointed by the curt ending to this conversation. By the time he’d arrived on his landing, the second, he’d decided that neither the psychology of Pradonet nor that of the proprietress was

any of his business. He opened the door of his room and was greeted immediately by the pungent animal smell which hung heavy on the air. Mesange had closed the window to escape, no doubt, the temptation of going out on the tiles. He was sleeping peacefully. So was Pistolet. A bed, empty but rather rumpled by Mesange, awaited Pierrot, who went over on tiptoe to the window and opened it softly. The fresh air made him feel exalted. The little town was spread out silently under the stars. The conventional train let out its well-known cry.

Pierrot felt he couldn't spend the night there, but he was very tired and thought of resting a little on one of the benches in the square round the town hall. He shut the window and went downstairs. To get out he had to wake the night-porter, who seemed pretty sore about it. It was warm outside. It wouldn't be too bad, sleeping in the open air. He looked round to get his bearings ; as a signpost indicated the direction of the station, he followed its advice, abandoning, provisionally at any rate, his original intention : he thought he might be able to find a café or buffet still open, where he could drink some kind of liquid to take the taste out of his mouth ; moreover, if Petit Pouce was trying to avoid him, perhaps he meant to take a train in the night, in which case Pierrot would have a chance of catching up on him. Not that he (Pierrot) was particularly interested in the doings of Petit Pouce, but he would have liked to talk to him just to see about this hotel proprietress who'd worked in the Amusement Park, and who might well be the cause of Petit Pouce's presence on the scene.

But in front of the station everything was as dark and silent as in the rest of the town ; Pierrot crossed the station-

yard. A porter told him that the Paris express had passed through twenty minutes ago, and that there was no other train leaving before dawn. There was no one in the waiting-room, not a sign of Petit Pouce, and Pierrot asked the porter the way back to the town hall.

The silence, the darkness, the narrow streets, all influenced Pierrot to think of nothing special, except for some vague speculations on what time it could possibly be by now. He looked to right and left of him, but could see nothing worthy of curiosity; nothing approaching in interest, even, the ball-bearings shop in the Avenue Chaillot. Remembering the days of his military service, he thought of visiting the local Y.M.C.A., but could find no one to tell him where it was. Finally he got lost. He was now crossing a working-class quarter, with a few factories here and there. One of them was lit up; engines were throbbing inside. Further along he came upon a broadish road, with a row of trees down each side: a by-pass? Or main thoroughfare? He couldn't make up his mind. He went on walking.

Then, quite near him, a scream rang out: a woman's scream, a scream of terror.

The first thought that occurred to him—an immediately realizable project—was to scarper at once in the opposite direction. But having reflected upon the feminine nature of the cry, courage returned to him and he looked for its source. There were plenty of stars up aloft, but they didn't give out much light. Pierrot approached a ditch. The woman screamed in fear once more. Then he saw her. Moreover, he could make out a push bike not far off.

"Mustn't be scared," he started by saying. No answer came. He repeated this phrase. Reassured no doubt by the

gentleness of his voice, the woman climbed out of the ditch.

She came forward saying :

" I know it's silly, but I was scared out of my life. I've been there two hours, scared to death."

It was the voice of Yvonne. Pierrot recognized it at once. She was now quite close to him. A ray of light, from a star of the first magnitude, though a little exhausted by its journey through the firmament, dimly lit up the tip of her nose. It was Yvonne right enough.

" You needn't be afraid, Mademoiselle Pradonet," Pierrot said solemnly.

" Well . . . ! " she exclaimed, astonished.

She stared at him.

" I seem to recognize you," she said without conviction.

" I worked at the Amusement Park," he told her. " We've seen each other quite often."

" Then we don't need any introduction," said Yvonne " but get me out of here."

" That your bike ? "

" Yes, but the tyre's flat and I've lost my way."

" So've I," said Pierrot.

" We're no better off, then," said Yvonne. " This is hell. Are you absolutely lost ? "

" Yes."

As he lifted the bike out of the ditch, he added that he didn't mind it now, as much as all that.

" I know ! " said Yvonne. " You're a pal of Gontran's."

" Who's Gontran ? "

"Don't you know ? Paradis."

"Oh, that his name ? First I've heard. Well, one lives and learns."

"He's a bloody fool," said Yvonne.

"Is he ? Why ?"

He inspected the metal steed of Pradonet's daughter, but there wasn't much to be done with it. He noted that the luggage-carrier was heavily laden.

"You go hiking with him ?" Pierrot asked.

"Congratulations !" she said warmly. "You're not so dumb."

"I do my best," said Pierrot.

"Well, you've hit it. We went off on a hike together. I told my parents there was a whole crowd of us. They didn't need me any more anyway. Course, you know the Amusement Park was burned down ?"

"Yes."

"I had some leave coming to me anyhow. So off I went with Gontran day before yesterday, but . . . Not boring you, am I ?"

"Course not," said Pierrot.

"We slept at Saint-Mouézy-sur-Eon," she went on, "but not under canvas. We were too tired to put the tent up. Besides, I don't know how it's done. I must find out. Have you ever slept in a tent at all ?"

"Yes, when I was in the army."

"Don't be funny. So we slept at an hotel."

Pierrot didn't feel like asking for more precise information.

"This morning," she continued, "we were up first thing, left at six. We fairly shot along, everything going

fine. Not that I care for bicycling, really, but fresh air has its points, don't you think ? ”

“ Yes,” said Pierrot.

“ Anyhow, we're not going to stand here nattering all night, are we ? ”

“ No,” said Pierrot.

He suggested returning to his hotel, and tried to pick out the Great Bear amid the stellar confusion, so as to find the north. Finally he told Yvonne to follow him “ this way,” without really knowing where it led. She thought he was not as lost as he pretended to be, and started to walk along beside him. He slung the bicycle over his shoulder, and Yvonne took some of the baggage on her back.

“ Where'd I get to with my story ? ” asked Yvonne, after they'd walked for a few yards in silence.

“ You were fairly shooting along.”

“ Oh, yes. Well, we left the main road. Gontran wanted to go through some wood or other. But anyway, you don't give a damn what we did.”

“ Oh yes, I do.”

“ No, you don't, but you n take it from me that Gontran's a dirty rotter.”

“ What's he done ? ”

“ Never mind. It doesn't matter. Tell me, what were you doing on the road at this hour ? ”

“ I went for a walk and got lost.”

“ Same here,” said Yvonne.

“ Where's Paradis ? ” asked Pierrot.

“ I don't know and I don't care.”

“ What are you going to do now ? ”

“Repair my bike and go on alone.”

“Why not come with me to Palinsac ? I can give you a lift.”

“You’ve got a car ? ”

Her face lit up, so radiant with joy it might have been a new star coming out.

“It’s only a truck, but it’s better than walking,” said Pierrot.

And he started to tell her animal stories.

8

THE EVENING papers from Paris seldom reached Palinsac before half-past eight, sometimes not until nine. Then there was a big run on Paul, the newsagent, especially on the part of the sporting fraternity. Then some inhabitants of the town came one by one to buy the news-sheet which they would take up to bed with them.

One of Paul's chief customers never came in before nine o'clock, just as the shop was shutting. He took his paper, dropped his pennies in the tin cup, whose presence testified to Paul's faith in the honesty of his clientele, then (only occasionally) unfolded it (the paper), and if he felt like it, commented on the news, quite competently and not unintelligently. Paul listened with the same sympathy that he reserved for the reflections of his other customers. He might, comparing these various opinions, appreciative and otherwise (had he possessed a sound critical sense), have reached an objective evaluation of the news. But he didn't give a blow. Up to a point, of course. He didn't believe in complicating his life.

This customer threw a quick glance at the rag, exclaiming:

"Tripe, my dear Paul. All this is absolute tripe. Politics, wars, sport : not an atom of interest in the lot. What I go

for's the crimes and the law courts. Society can go hang itself : I don't want to know. People, now, how people behave : that's something. The rest's all smoke, clouds, pipe dreams. Proof : when there's more than one person talking, one talks cock. There's got to be two for a murder to be committed, and once there's a third in a couple, it means cuckoldry. Crime, adultery, anything off the beaten track, that's what makes mankind interesting. Looking down from on high, it looks lousy ; at the height of a person's head, it's amusing."

There was a silence, since Paul considered this view of life to be a bit illogical. However, it didn't upset him, not being exactly original.

"Everything all right with you?" he asked calmly.

"Not too bad, thanks. Business as usual. I'd two lovely apes who've kicked the bucket, just when they were beginning to ride a bicycle beautifully. I thought of getting them a tandem, but they had to go and die on me. Goodbye to all that. Milou, another of the monkeys, has diarrhoca ; he'll croak next, bound to. Pity : I liked him. Good fellow. Well . . ."

"Anything in the paper?" asked Paul.

"Nothing about my troubles. And yet . . . look here : three columns devoted to war . . . two to a change of Cabinet . . . one to a boxing match . . . one to an Academy Award . . . all that stinks. I tell you, my dear Paul, to be more interesting than an animal, man's got to be alone or in less than a threesome, anyway . . . you've heard of the two-backed beast, haven't you, Paul? Very odd, my friend, very odd indeed. Pity they don't stuff them and keep them in museums. These two-backed beasts have very strange

habits, nothing to do with nationalization, hygiene, philanthropy, or the good honest-to-God John Citizen. Roll up, roll up, lays and gents, take a look at this remarkable specimen ! ”

“ You’re a queer cove to be sure, Monsieur Voussois,” said Paul.

He swallowed his own laughter. He couldn’t get over it.

“ I’d rather you laughed than burst out crying,” said Voussois. “ I’m not such a bad bugger at heart.”

“ Good old Monsieur Voussois ! What’s the paper say tonight ? ”

“ Let’s see . . . what’d I tell you ! Listen to this : ‘ HE BIT HIS RABBITS BECAUSE HE LOVED THEM ’. Here’s a bloke had a rabbit-hutch, and the R.S.P.C.A. got on his tail because he was fond of his bunnies, he threw ’em up in the air and caught them in his teeth. Eh ? What about that ? Terrific ! Doesn’t it throw more light on the make-up of mankind than eighteen wars and thirty-six peace treaties ? What does my friend Paul have to say on the subject ? ”

“ It’s not for me to contradict you,” said Paul.

“ Ah, here’s another one . I’m intersted in : ‘ CAUSE OF GREAT AMUSEMENT PARK FIRE : JW BEING INVESTIGATED ’.”

“ I went there once,” said Paul, “ after my second cousin got married. We were all wearing paper hats and streamers, and we went round all the sideshows. We’d a good laugh, I can tell you. It was fun, I won’t deny it, and, by the way, Monsieur Voussois, oddly enough, it was in their Palace of Laughter so-called that I first learned a thing or two about the girls in Paris . . . ha ! ha ! ha ! When I remember . . . ”

“ Let me tell *you* something, now,” said Voussois.

“ Please do.”

“ I think all those places are obscene, stupid, vulgar, and unhealthy. They only appeal to the basest instincts of mankind : lasciviousness, charlatanism, fooling and being fooled, misbehaviour of all sorts. They merit the contempt of all decent people, workers and artistes. I was damned glad to hear all that filth had gone up in smoke.”

“ So you’ve already said.”

“ In reading the papers, I could hear the flames crackling round the burning stalls, even those that didn’t get burnt. It was wonderful news ! ”

“ Have they found out who did it ? ”

“ They’ll never find out. They’ve brought in a verdict of accidental causes.”

“ All the better,” said Paul. “ Means one criminal less.”

“ It was no crime to burn down that place.”

“ Come, come, Monsieur Voussois, the way you’re talking, they’d have accused *you* if you’d been in Paris that day.”

“ But I’ve a perfect alibi. Wasn’t I here all the time ? ”

“ I was only joking,” said Paul, the newsagent.

After a slight pause Voussois went on :

“ No, it was no crime to set fire to that Amusement Park ! ”

He folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

“ Good night, Paul, my friend. You see, crimes *can* be interesting.”

He went out.

Voussois lived outside the town ; he didn’t often come into it. He lived in the midst of his animals. His house had high walls surrounding it, nobody knew what went on in

there, and even the animals were rarely seen going in and out. Their various cries could be heard, however. But all this was so tactfully managed that tourists, looking for oddities, never even heard about it. Voussois did not encourage visitors. The mayor, a forward-looking man, thought of turning the Animals' Training Institute into the objective of an excursion tour; apes could have punched the tickets at the station, elephants carried the luggage, camels done instead of taxis. In the restaurants porcupines could have offered their spines as toothpicks, and kangaroos carried telegrams in their marsupial pouches. But this was only a pipe dream, which the mayor would never have dared to mention to Voussois—a difficult man with ideas all his own.

At the end of the garden Voussois saw a light on in his dining-room: someone was awaiting him. As he thought he knew who this would be, he took his time in saying good night to the animals, stroking muzzles and snouts, patting backs or flanks, distributing candy. Milou shook with fever under his blankets; his cage smelled particularly strong, owing to the nature of his malady; he held out to Voussois a delicately shaped little hand, now wet and limp. Voussois spoke softly and encouragingly to him, but he knew full well the poor brute'd croak. Milou closed his eyes and drew his hand away.

In the dining-room the visitor was voraciously eating up the remains of the dinner. He shook his knife, with some filaments of grub still clinging to it, in the air: it was a form of greeting. Voussois sat down opposite and poured himself a glass of wine.

"Well," he said, "d'you see the damage?"

“ Yes,” said the other, shifting in his mouth a few bits of cold veal. “ Nothing left.”

“ Why didn’t you write me ? ”

“ Too much fag.”

“ What about the chapel ? ”

“ Intact.”

“ What ! Nothing left of the Amusement Park and the chapel still safe and sound ? ”

“ Correct. I saw it.”

Voussois rubbed his hands with joy. He waited till his guest had finished putting away the food before asking :

“ Tell me all about it.”

“ Well, imagine everything razed flat, charred, black, twisted, melted down. The Chair-o-Planes and the Scenic Railway’re only scrap iron. But you’ve read the paper surely ? ”

“ Yes. So that’s how it is.”

“ As I’ve told you.”

“ The papers often tell lies. They make things up. I know.”

“ It’s all in ruins. Ruins.”

“ What’s to happen now ? ”

“ Well, I talked to Pradonet after the ‘ disaster ’, as he calls it. He wants to build a huge amusement palace on the site, which’ll be a fair seven floors high, not counting a pylon for parachutists on the roof. He’s ambitious, sec ? Only black spot’s the chapel. He wants to buy the ground and knock down the tomb, but there’s nothing doing : Mounnezergues won’t sell out.”

“ Good. What’s Pradonet say ? ”

“ He just looks sad.”

They both laughed and lit cigarettes over their liqueurs.

"By the way," said the guest, "someone recognized me as being Jojo Mouilleminche's brother."

"No!"

"Yes. Someone said: I can tell from the way you talk you come from up north, you wouldn't be Jojo Mouilleminche's brother, would you?"

"What'd you answer?"

"What'd you expect? I answered yes."

"And who asked you that?"

"Prouillot's widow."

"She knew Jojo Mouilleminche?"

"She'd been his mistress."

"Prouillot's widow?"

"Yes. She was singing in a night-club at the time."

"What time's that?"

"About twenty years ago."

"Twenty years?"

Voussois thought for some time.

"I don't remember," he said.

He tried hard to conjure up everything connected in his mind with this period; he exhumed several mistresses. Covered in ashes of suitable colours, according to their appropriate seasons, none of them bore any resemblance, in Voussois's memory, to Leonie kicking her legs about in a club.

"I don't remember," he repeated.

"She does, extremely well, and although you just dropped her suddenly . . ."

"These things happen," said Voussois.

". . . you've still a big place in her heart. When she talks about you she gets all het up."

"I couldn't care less."

“D’you really not remember her?”

“I think it must’ve been about the time I was thrown from that horse. All that period’s a bit of a blur to me. She was probably my girl-friend at the time of the accident, maybe that’s why I dropped her: without meaning to. But what’s it matter! I’d have left her sooner or later anyway, one day or another . . .”

“All the same,” said Crouia Bey, “she cried like hell when I told her about your death.”

“Which death’s that?”

“One I made up on the spur of the moment. Consider yourself killed, very romantically, ten years ago, trying to climb a wall to get to a young girl you were in love with.”

“Did she like this end to my existence?”

“Yes. But now she’s intrigued about the girl. Wants to know who it was.”

“You didn’t tell her?”

“No, I couldn’t think of anyone. Besides, I wasn’t in Europe at the time. I told her a bit about my travels in Africa.”

“So she’s still got a crush on me?”

“That’s it.”

Voussois once more turned over the memories of his erstwhile loves, still without finding a place for a woman called Leonie dancing the hula-hula in a dive.

“Anyway,” said Crouia Bey, “I’m off to bed now.”

“How’d your show go?”

“All right. I’m fagged out. I’m for some kip.”

“Good night,” said Voussois.

And still he couldn’t remember any little Leonie singing and shaking her hips in a floorshow. There was a Lily who

was a hooper he vaguely remembered at a place called the Boite à Dix Sous, but no Leonie.

He went on drinking and smoking cigarettes for a little while longer, deep in thought. From time to time a night-bird screeched outside. He kept them as pets. Never tried to train them. He knew each of their voices : would have liked them, when he died, to nest near his grave. And he was just about to think of the Amusement Park again, when a ring came at the bell. He got up, and saw through the open window a truck drawn up before the gate.

He went to open.

The lamp at the door lit up the name of the travelling circus painted in big on the side of the truck. Voussois was expecting it : Psermis had written to him.

"This is no time to arrive," he told the driver.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Pierrot. "I'd have waited till the morning, but finally I thought I'd like the whole thing settled tonight. Mesange got a bit awkward. Why, he tried to rape my fiancée ! I had to knock him cold. He's in the lorry, tied up. And then he couldn't stand me having glasses on. Things got a bit sticky in the finish."

"I don't give a sod for your fiancée," said Voussois. "That's no reason to maltreat my animals."

"That's a debatable point," said Pierrot.

"What about Pistolet ?"

"Oh, he's been very good. He's asleep. The rest of the cargo was very well behaved. You'll see : I looked after 'em fine. And Mesange isn't badly hurt, really. Just a whack across the dome with a stick. And until this rape idea got into him, we understood each other perfectly."

"Where's your fiancée now ?"

“ You seem very nosy,” remarked Pierrot.

“ And you seem a bloody odd sort of customer. You could quite well have waited till the morning for all your tall stories. Anyhow, get back in the truck.”

Pierrot climbed into his driving seat and Voussois opened the gateway wide.

Then they unloaded the truck. The cockatoos began yelling, and a few parrots who had the gift of tongues used up every human swear word they knew, and in every possible language. Some members of the same tribe, lodging with Voussois, answered them, and other beasts joined in the clamour. A horrible din broke out. It woke Pistolet, who, recognizing Voussois, went over to say hello. He found on his own a place to spend the night. Mesange was still half-conscious : Voussois brought him to. They shook hands with emotion. Subdued by all his adventures, Mesange made no difficulty about dossing down in an unfamiliar cage. Pierrot had crouched back in a dark corner, so that the sight of him should not reawaken the fury of his travelling companion.

When they'd done work, Voussois invited Pierrot to have a drink with him before going to bed. They went into the dining-room. The table was not entirely cleared. There were wine and liqueur stains upon the cloth. The window was open on the park. The animals had calmed down and gone back to sleep, except the pet owls who sang out from time to time. The two men sat down facing one another. Pierrot remembered vaguely having seen this bloke somewhere before.

“ D'you have a long time getting here ? ” Voussois asked him.

"I started out day before yesterday," answered Pierrot, "spent the night at Saint-Fleurs-sur-Cavaillet, and got here in the evening. That truck's a stinker, you know."

"Have you known Psermis long?"

"Eight days."

"That all? How long've you been with the circus then?"

"Eight days. When anyone asks me a question like that, it's usually the only answer I can give. I never stay long in one job; I gaff the chaff. Not because I like change, but because it comes that way. Example, I used to be at the Amusement Park. Well, I only stayed there two days all told, and then not even two days one after the other."

"But wasn't the Amusement Park burnt down?"

"Bet your life. What a blaze! I didn't see it myself, but it must have been, according to what's left of it. Smoking ruins, Monsieur Voussois! Must have been some fire. I was on the scene that very morning. By the way, it was that morning I met Monsieur Psermis. As it happened, he was sounding off about the fire. According to him, he'd seen the way it started: the model aeroplanes caught alight and flew off their pylon, setting fire to the whole place. Crazy, isn't it? The papers say it was an accident; that's good enough: what d'you say, Monsieur Voussois?"

"I don't give a sod," said Voussois.

"Nor me," said Pierrot.

"What the hell was Psermis doing there, anyway?"

"The circus's gaffed down bang opposite. You ought to know that."

"Ought I?"

"I'd have thought so."

" Well, let's get back to Mesange. What you mean by knocking him about ? "

" I'm really awfully sorry about that. Everything was going fine at the start, though Monsieur Psermis warned me he could be awkward. But we became buddies all the same. Then I ran into my fiancée . . . "

" Ah ! "

" Yes. Why're you so surprised ? It's the truth. She was hiking out this way with a girl friend and she smashed up her bike. I picked her up on the road where she'd broken down. Wouldn't you have done the same ? "

" Naturally. "

" Course you would ! Everything went well at first. Yvonne—that's my fiancée—was nice to him and he was very polite to her. I won't go into details about how the trouble started, but just before we got here it went from bad to worse. He got dangerous. Then he tried to tear my specs off. I didn't like that. At last he jumped on Yvonne. Course she was dead scared: wouldn't *you* be ? So I laid him out, old Mesange, and laid him out proper. Poor old bloke. "

" You're fond of animals ? " asked Voussois.

" Bet your life. But I never saw so many before, or so close to, as I have the last two days. "

" I hope you'll look after the ones you've got to take back to Psermis. "

" Three dogs, twenty ducks, a seal, and a snake-charmer, that's what he said. "

" Correct. Know what a snake-charmer's like ? "

" No. But Monsieur Psermis explained it all to me. "

" And what'll you do afterwards ? You working permanently at the circus ? "

"No. It's only temporary. After, I don't know what I'll do. I'll look around. I'm not scared of new jobs. But I wouldn't like to be a clown or a freak. I wouldn't mind being an acrobat. Or a tight-rope artist: smashing! But here I am talking about myself, you must be bored. I'm sorry. It's time for bed."

He emptied his glass and got up. So did Voussois, who, a moment later, asked him:

"How'd you like to work here, with me? Getting the animals used to things. Looking after 'em. Training 'em. It's a job that'd last you all your life. And it's interesting work, too. It's a chance for you: a wonderful chance, I can tell you. Think it over. I need some help at the moment. Think it over."

"Thanks, I will," said Pierrot.

"You'll be back tomorrow?"

"Yes, Monsieur Voussois."

They went out together. Voussois was going to open the gate.

"Don't bother," said Pierrot; "if you don't mind, I'll leave the truck. I can save 'n a garage, that way."

"I don't mind," said Voussois. "Good night. And I hope nobody else'll try to rape your fiancée."

"I hope not either," said Pierrot gravely, "Good night, Monsieur Voussois."

It took him ten minutes to reach the centre of the town and the hotel where he'd booked a room. He hadn't, therefore, much time to consider Voussois's offer; but he didn't need time: he'd already decided. He would teach apes to wear evening-dress, dogs to turn somersaults, and seals to clap their flippers in applause at their own feats. Perhaps

he might even teach a cat to play the drum or a lion the noble sport of roller-skating. Anyway, he felt full of sympathy for all animals, and prepared to feed and care for them, each according to its species. Having agreed (for the moment) upon his future, he could light-heartedly devote himself to other considerations, which soon weighted down once more the heart he'd just set free.

For much as he loved Yvonne, he was not, however, blind to the fact that she'd no wish to sleep with him, even out of kindness ; and apart from this, she didn't love him at all : that was obvious. It just came that way : there was nothing could be done about it. Proof was, that she'd enthusiastically agreed to share the room of her bar-sinister stepmother, whom they had run into by chance in the town, looking for an hotel. Pierrot was forced, as a result, to content himself with a single. To pass the time away, he'd taken the animals back to their owner ; especially since the health of Mesange, which he'd helped to impair, was worrying him. As to what Yvonne's pseudo-stepmother was doing in Palinsac, she hadn't told him.

Pierrot had got so far in his post-mortem of the situation, when he entered the town, and the twelve strokes of midnight dropped on him heavily from the belfry of a church. Cats occasionally crossed the empty street ; they were often grey and sidled away rapidly, full of suspicion at the sight of Pierrot.

He made a detour round by the station, where he hoped to find some signs of life ; he didn't feel like shutting on himself the lonely door of a room in which the desired companion did not await him. But the trains had all either come or gone, and the porters didn't expect any more in before

the early hours. Everything seemed to be asleep, with the exception, perhaps, of some pointsman or telegraphist, who had no wish to lend this part of the town the lively atmosphere hoped for by Pierrot. The cafés round about had long since put to bed on marble tables their chairs, rubbed smooth by behinds devoid of the desire for travel.

Pierrot walked slowly back to the hotel. He listened to his own footsteps echoing out.

The night-porter, wearing braces, opened the door to him.

"Good evening," said Pierrot, "I could do with a drink."

"Bar's closed," said the man, "but if you don't mind drinking it somewhere else, I can rake you up something, I daresay. I wouldn't refuse a drink to a dog."

"A glass of wine'd do me," said Pierrot.

"This way."

He switched the lights on in the empty café, waking the furniture from its snooze. The floor was swept, but the place hadn't quite assumed the aspect it had in the small hours.

"So you want some wine," asked the night-porter.

"Yes, please," said Pierrot, looking absent-mindedly around him.

"You seem preoccupied, sir," said the porter.

"No, I'm not," said Pierrot, "but I often think about nothing."

"Better than thinking about anything," said the night-porter. "How d'you like the wine?"

"I've drunk worse."

"Usually, when people of your age pull the sort of face you did just now, they're in love."

"Think so? You're right, far's I'm concerned. That's what's so bad."

"You very much in love?"

"Oh yes. A lot. So much I can't put a measure to it."

"I've been the same in my time. Hurts, don't it?"

The telephone rang. The night-porter took off the receiver, spoke into it, and came back.

"It's the two dames in No. 15," he said, "they want lemonades."

"Pour one out for me and I'll take 'em up," said Pierrot.

"You can't do that!"

Pierrot estimated the night-porter's professional scruples at five francs and gave him a tip amounting to this sum. He was therefore able to take the ladies up their order. He stopped before the door of No. 15, and listened: he could hear voices inside. He knocked; they said Come in; he obeyed.

Yvonne was already in bed. Mme Leonie Prouillot, enveloped in a pseudo-japanese dressing-gown, sat in a chair with her legs crossed, smoking a cheroot.

"What the hell's up with you?" she said, seeing Pierrot.
"Got a job as night-porter or something?"

"No."

He distributed the refreshments and put his own glass on a little table, by the side of which he then sat down.

"Got rid of your animals?" asked Yvonne.

"Yes. I got to fetch some more tomorrow."

Leonie looked at him.

"You got any brains?" she asked.

Pierrot returned her stare ill-humouredly.

"I'm not a bigger b.f. than anyone else," was his answer.

Without chiding him for his insolence, Leonie continued her third-degree.

"You know Petit Pouce?"

"From the Amusement Park? Course I do."

"Well, what sort of a bloke is he?"

Pierrot said: "Someone you've entrusted with a confidential inquiry?"

"How d'you know that?" cried Leonie.

She was dumbfounded.

"I've already told you I'm not a b.f.," answered Pierrot. "Now, spill what it's all about."

"Go on, tell him about your old loves, Leonie," said Yvonne, delighted by Pierrot's sudden show of intelligence.

"Listen," Leonie told him, "I'm not going to confide in you. But here's the long and short of it: I want to know what's become of a girl who, ten years ago, was the cause of someone's tragic death. It happened here, in Palinsac. Petit Pouce was supposed to find her for me. I advanced him money for that purpose. He went off eight days ago: come to think of it, the day before the fire. Forty-eight hours after he wired me he'd gone to Saint-Mouëzy-sur-Eon, where he hoped to find her. Since then I've heard nothing; and I gave him eight days, not more, to do the trick. As I see he's done me, I've come here to find out for myself. You might be able to help. I'll pay your hotel bill and give you ten francs pocket-money."

"I'm leaving for Paris tomorrow," said Pierrot, "I'm awfully sorry."

"Give up these animals."

"Can't. I'm sorry."

He drank some lemonade. He found it frightful.

"All right," said Leonie, "then why did you make me tell you all that?"

"She hasn't told you everything now," Yvonne told Pierrot. "She was in love with the boy who got killed. He'd left her ten years before."

"But why," Pierrot asked Leonie, "have you only just taken it up?"

"Because I didn't find out till a few days ago," answered Leonie.

"The fakir told her," said Yvonne, "Crouia Bey."

"Did he tell her fortune?" asked Pierrot.

"No. He was the chap's brother."

"That's a hell of a yarn," said Pierrot coldly.

"Ancient history," said Leonie, "twenty years ago it happened. Think of that. Twenty years, my children!"

"Nearly the length of time between me and my first communion," said Pierrot.

"No kidding?" said Yvonne. "Are you as old as that? You look much younger!"

"Then you're thirty?" asked Leonie.

"Twenty-eight this year," answered Pierrot.

But Leonie wasn't interested in Pierrot's age.

"Tomorrow," she said, "I'm starting my investigations. What're you going to do?" she asked Yvonne.

"I'll stay two or three days with you to see how you get on, if you don't mind. Then I'll go on with my hike. I don't know what's happened to my friends."

"I'm on the move again tomorrow," said Pierrot.

"With the animals?" asked Yvonne.

"Yes. This time I'll have a seal and a snake-charmer, I'm told."

“The little boar was sweet,” said Yvonne, “but that ape was a swine!”

“There was nothing between you two?” Leonie asked suddenly.

“Between who?” Yvonne demanded. “The ape and me?”

“Of course not, silly. Between you and Pierrot.”

“Oh no, ma’am,” said Pierrot.

He blushed.

“Shall we see you tomorrow?” Leonie asked him.

“I should say. Shall we have a drink together?”

“Right you are.”

“And think over my offer,” said Leonie.

In the morning Pierrot went to see Voussois, but found nobody there except one of the hands, who told him to come back at two o’clock, when everything would be ready for his departure. He took Pierrot on a tour of the park and introduced him to not only the characters he had to take back to Paris, that’s to say, the three dogs, Fifi, Mimi, and Titi, all fox-terriers able to do backward somersaults, to present arms and to add up two figures when sufficiently prompted; the seal, performing of course, but of a mediocre intelligence and filled with a desire above all else to consume fish in the largest possible quantity (Pierrot, for the duration of the journey, was to be amply provided with the means of satisfying this desire)—this seal was called Mizzi; and to Marcel, the snake-charmer, a giant naked except for three feathers, who’d been brought all the way from Abyssinia to cause a flutter in the hen-coop; but also to the other animals that Voussois was engaged in training, those he’d been unable to train, and those he didn’t mean to train, but which he did business with all

the same, or that he had there simply for love of his art or because he liked them. Pierrot noticed, too, lying back in a deck-chair, Crouia Bey, who was taking the sun. He recognized him at once and was astonished. The servant, asked who he was, answered that this was M. Voussois' brother, a professional hunter and distinguished animal-trapper, who had travelled all over the world. Pierrot, though far from satisfied, didn't question him further.

He spent the morning there and thought that to live amongst all these animals must be very nice. He decided more and more to accept Voussois's offer, but didn't wait for him any longer than the first stroke of noon.

In the café on the ground floor of his hotel he found Yvonne and Leonie drinking vermouth and fanning themselves. He ordered one, too, dropped a large block of ice in his glass and watched it melt.

"How's your inquiries, Madame Pradonet?" he asked Leonie. "Going on okay?"

"I've not had time to do much," she answered. "I've been to the town hall, they can find no record of anyone dying called Mouillemine. The town clerk's lived here all his life, and he's never heard of a death of that sort. There's nothing in the local papers, either; I've been to the newspaper office."

"That's funny," said Pierrot.

"It is, isn't it?"

"Yes. Doesn't look too good."

"No. And in both places they told me somebody'd already been there asking the same questions."

Petit Pouce, thus invoked, materialized immediately in the shape of a telegram brought by the hotel-porter.

"Forwarded from Paris," said Leonie. "My God! That's funny, listen to this: 'Am well on track, stop please send another thousand francs poste restante Saint-Mouëzy-sur-Eon!' And it's signed: 'Petit Pouce'."

"He's been cleverer than we have," said Yvonne.

"I must send off the money at once," said Leonie with enthusiasm.

"The post-office will be shut," remarked Pierrot.

"That's true," said Leonie, sitting down again.

"Saint-Mouëzy-sur-Eon," Pierrot said, thinking things over, "but I passed through there on the way here . . ."

"Course you did," said Yvonne; "it's on the main road. I passed through it too."

She looked at him with curiosity. He didn't bat an eyelid.

"I wonder what he's found out," Leonie said dreamily. She was learning Petit Pouce's telegram off by heart.

"By the way," said Pierrot, to prevent the conversation from dying a natural death, "I met someone we know this morning at Voussois's place. I was a bit surprised to see him there."

"Ah!" the two women exclaimed in chorus.

"Guess who."

"Gontran!" exclaimed Yvonne.

And sure enough, there was Paradis getting off a bicycle right in front of them.

"One of my hiking pals," Yvonne explained to Leonie, "he's found me at last."

Paradis, very surprised to see Pierrot and Mme Pradonet, hardly dared come forward.

"Come and join us," Yvonne beckoned to him.

He came over.

"Where are the others?" she asked him.

"What others?" he asked in his turn.

He was still a bit stunned with his surprise.

"Silly! The other hikers of course."

"Oh, yes," he said, "I get it. They're waiting for us."

"Sit down and have a drink," suggested Leonie heartily.

Pierrot and Paradis shook hands.

"Didn't expect to find you here," said Paradis.

"You knock into everyone, down this part of the world," said Pierrot.

"Except the girl I'm looking for," said Leonie, "who's probably got five kids by now."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Pierrot.

Then he saw Voussois coming towards them.

A few seconds later Leonie fainted dead away into his arms.

EPILOGUE

IT WAS a Sunday morning and the day that the new Zoological Gardens in the Avenue Chaillot were due to open. As soon as he woke Pierrot remembered that he'd meant to go and see the opening of the Park Voussois, which, on the site previously occupied by the incinerated Amusement Park, offered a thousand rare animals to the curiosity of the public, a year almost to the day since the fire that had destroyed the stalls and sideshows that Pradonet had got together for the delectation of tourists, suburbanites and peeping Toms.

Pierrot took his time getting up. He'd become lazy these days. Hymns being sung in the convent down below drifted slowly up to him. A neighbour switched on the wireless full blast. Outside in the street cars purred peacefully by. The sun began to climb on to his balcony.

Getting out of bed at last, Pierrot made a brief toilet and went downstairs for his morning coffee, which he poured a brandy into : a habit he'd taken up of late. Then he climbed the stairs to his room again. As nowadays he no longer played the races, and therefore didn't buy a racing-paper, he put his feet up on the eiderdown, which was wearing a bit thin in that spot. He smoked two or three

cigarettes, dozed a little, a series of vague memories passed through his mind.

He lined up all the blokes he might have known in the days of the Amusement Park : there were some whose names he'd already forgotten ; the only person he remembered at all clearly was Mounnezergues, a nice chap, whose heir he might have become, if you could believe everything the old boy told you. Pierrot had never been back to see him, not even to thank him for having provided him with a little holiday at the expense of the travelling circus ; afterwards he had found work at the other end of Paris : at this end of the town there was no longer any Yvonne, who was basking in the sunshine or sheltered from it by a canvas tent pitched under a cloudless sky. As for Voussois, well, after all, training animals and keeping them in cages wasn't really Pierrot's line of country.

The tide of events had swept him along far out of the way of these chance encounters, to which his life had once seemed anchored. It was one of the most self-contained episodes of his life, so completely rounded-off that when he gave it all his attention (which, however, seldom happened), he saw clearly how all the material contained in it could have been dovetailed into a mystery story capable of solution like an algebraic problem, in which there are as many equations as unknown quantities, and he saw how it had not been like that at all : he saw the story it could have made, a detective story with a crime, a criminal, and a sleuth ; a succession of clues leading to a surprise climax ; and he saw the story as it had been in reality : a story so ingenuous, so devoid of artifice, that it was impossible to guess whether or not there had been any mystery to solve,

a story which might so easily have followed the course of a thriller novel, but which, in point of fact, was singularly lacking in all the qualities necessary to hold the reader's attention.

Pierrot wiped his spectacles carefully, consulted his watch and stubbed out his cigarette on the marble top of the night-table, using immediately afterwards the chamber-pot which this contained, although it was nearly midday. He went out to have a drink at a quiet little café on the angle of two streets. Then he lunched at a restaurant, also small, nearly as small as the café, then he walked slowly, calmly, towards the Zoological Gardens. He passed families, out for an airing, all got up in their Sunday best, soldiers on pass, little housemaids taking time off from their feather dusters and leaded grates. He stopped in front of several shops, he'd always liked window-gazing. Cars, bicycles, postage-stamps were all examined by him with the severity of the connoisseur, disinterested and unhampered, however, by the cares of material possession. He passed the ball-bearings shop, and was pleased to see the little steel spheres describing once again their impeccable arcs.

He approached the Avenue Chaillot. There was in front of him a sort of fog. It was a crowd of people trampling the asphalt and crushing the gravel underfoot. There was a queue to get into the Zoo. Pierrot looked at this mob in disgust, he didn't want any part of it. As his gaze came back full-circle to the street down which he'd come, he saw, leaning against a lamp-post, a man whom he thought he knew.

He walked past him, turned round, looked at the man's face, finally came up and spoke.

"Hello, Monsieur Pradonet," were the words he pronounced when he had gone through the procedure outlined above.

"How d'you do, sir," said Pradonet quietly.

"Don't you recognize me?" asked Pierrot.

"Can't say I do," answered Pradonet benignly, "I can't place you. You mustn't blame me, I've met so many people in my life. . . ."

"I quite understand. Besides, you only saw me three or four times. I used to work at the Amusement Park. . . ."

"Ah, the Amusement Park . . ." sighed Pradonet.

"True, I wasn't there long. Don't you remember? I played a trick on you one day . . . you tripped and fell into one of the Dodgem cars."

"Ah!" Pradonet cried out joyfully. "Of course I remember! You had me properly that time. But next day, remember, I got my own back. I had you thrown out because you made a pass at my daughter Yvonne. Ah, those were the days!"

"Shall we have a drink?" suggested Pierrot.

"No, thanks, I've got a bad liver, and I hate ginger-beer. Let's take a stroll round, we can talk on the way."

They went up the street towards the river. Pradonet didn't speak for a while.

"How's Mademoiselle Yvonne?" asked Pierrot, taking a deep breath.

"She married one of your pals, I think, chap called Paradis."

"That so?"

"It upset you?" asked Pradonet. "You'd fallen for her, I'll be bound. I wouldn't let it worry you. There were so

many others, so many others. . . . Like to see her ? There she is over there, in that pay-box. She gave me the go-by to work for Voussois."

Pierrot pretended to look, but he didn't want to see her. There was certainly a sort of sentry-box in front of which people were pushing and shoving one another : he looked at anything rather than that, above it, below it, at the leaves on the trees : yes, they'd do ; anything but . . .

From over the wall of the Zoo, over the heads of the crowd, floated the roar of a lion, followed by the trumpeting of an elephant. Various birds were singing, each according to their kind.

" Yes," Pradonet went on, " those were the days ! "

As they were passing the corner of the Rue des Larmes, Pierrot did not speak.

" I don't know," continued Pradonet, " why I should unload all my troubles on you. Anyway, cut a long story short, they kicked me out. Who're ' they ' ? Madame Prouillot, who was my girl-friend, and Monsieur Voussois, the animal-tamer, that she found, by following the directions of a fakir, in a small provincial town. Yes, sir, he'd left her twenty years before, and twenty years later he came back to pick her up again like a glove that he'd dropped. And those two lovers, so faithful to each other through the years, got down straight away to cooking up a shady business transaction, bringing in everything, including the law, to prevent me from ever founding a bigger and better Amusement Park, aided and abetted, yes, sir, by the oddly fatetul and unfortunate presence, sir, on the scene, of a Poldavian chapel, where the bones of a certain Prince Luigi are buried."

"I met you one day at Monsieur Mounnczergues's house," said Pierrot, to show he was still listening.

"D'you know him then?" Pradonet asked politely.

"Slightly."

"Then you know the chapel too," said Pradonet, "and the tomb?"

"Bet your life," answered Pierrot.

"I know it too," moaned Pradonet, "do I know it! Without I'd have built on that site a Palace of Laughter such as the world has never seen. Ah, they'd have had their money's worth on each of the seven floors that I'd planned to build. There'd have been every game of chance and skill, every joke, every trick, every spoof, every possible entertainment . . . From one year's end to another, and from morning till night, whole crowds would have flung themselves into a whirl of excitement and laughter, with such roars of delight they'd even have drowned the thunder of the loud-speakers. But a Poldavian prince had to go and die twenty years before on that very spot. And a man who makes wax dummies had to go and devote his whole life to looking after his ashes. That chapel, sir, was a mine laid under my castles in Spain. Bang! crash! boom! one horrible day everything went up in the air. I was left defenceless to combat the underhand schemes of my cunning enemies. Since I was never to see, in all its glory, the mammoth edifice which I wished to build, then damn it all to hell! Let Voussois marry Prouillot's widow, let him build his bloody Noah's Ark on the charred remains of my Amusement Park. I didn't even try to fight back, sir! Ah, sir! Ah! . . . you've no idea . . . Voussois was very nasty to me, he upset me very much. Ah, sir, you've no idea . . ."

Two or three times he opened his mouth without emitting a sound, like a landed fish gasping out its life at the bottom of a boat. Then, with a low wail, he fell forward into Pierrot's arms, sobbing loudly. Pierrot had to hold him in this position for a few minutes before he calmed down; they walked in silence to the top of the street, before separating.

"I'm nearly home now," said Pradonet, who had almost recovered his self-possession, "I live along here now with my wife, my real wife. But never mind, I must've been boring you. And it's been good of you, sir, to listen to the babblings of a silly old fool. Goodbye, sir, and thank you."

They shook hands heartily and up the empty street Pradonet's back receded slowly towards the newsagent's shop owned by the wife to whom he'd returned at last.

As Pierrot, on his way back, passed the Rue des Larmes, he went into this street. The chapel was still there, bathed in forgetfulness and calm. The scaffolding of the Scenic Railway no longer overshadowed it. There were now only a few rocks in its immediate neighbourhood, over which, from the street, one could occasionally see a marmoset scrambling. Pierrot remembered his pal Mesange, now confined behind solid bars for the delectation, no doubt, of rowdy schoolboys in long trousers or short pants.

The house opposite had not changed at all. Pierrot remembered his friend Mounnezergues, whom he hadn't seen for so long. He looked at the little square surrounding Prince Luigi's tomb and it seemed to him that it was not as well tended as in the days gone by. He therefore went across the street and rang Mounnezergue's doorbell. But the bell didn't ring. He started to walk away, then came back

on his tracks, rang the bell again. Still nothing happened. But Pierrot knew that, if he was going to play his part to a finish, he had, by some means or other, to enter that house.

Which he did.

For the door was not locked. He noticed that the wire of the bell had been unhooked. The house being parallel to the garden and its front-door at the side, Pierrot had to pass one of the windows on the ground-floor. It was open ; through it he could see Mounnezergues dozing in a cane-chair. Pierrot looked at him sleeping for a few moments, when all at once it occurred to him that the other might be dying. Seized by a sudden panic he called : " Monsieur Mounnezergues ! Monsieur Mounnezergues ! " And M. Mounnezergues opened his eyes, recognized Pierrot and smiled. It took him some time to gather enough strength to open his mouth, still longer before he was able to speak.

" It's you," he murmured. " It is you, isn't it ? The young man who came to see me several times last year ? "

" Yes, sir."

" You went to Palinsac with some animals Psermis wouldn't have ? "

" That's right."

" Why did you never come to see me again ? I liked you."

" I found a job the other side of Paris, and then I'd my reasons for not coming round here again. It brought back memories."

" Memories of love ? "

" Yes, sir, Pradonet's daughter."

" Ah, Pradonet . . . "

A pause.

"I've just seen him again," said Pierrot.

"Did he tell you all his troubles?" asked Mounnezergues.

"Yes, sir. How Voussois got the Amusement Park away from him and how . . ."

"I know, I know," interrupted Mounnezergues.

"He doesn't seem to have anything against you."

"I know. As you might expect, I've seen him."

He smiled.

"Now," he said, "the prince's last sleep will no longer be disturbed by the unholy din of the Amusement Park, the disgusting clamour of its loud-speakers and the discordant braying of its steam-organs. I can die happy."

He closed his eyes for a few moments.

"Come in," he said then, "and give me paper and ink."

"Yes, sir."

Pierrot entered and gave him writing materials. He had to hunt round in a pile of junk to find these. It was becoming tatty chez Mounnezergues, who must have guessed Pierrot's thoughts, for he said :

"I live entirely alone. Remember that, it has an important bearing on what I have to tell you."

Pierrot placed a table before the old man, with pen, ink, paper and a blotter.

"This," said Mounnezergues, writing, "is not my will. My will is already drawn up and with my solicitors. This is a codicil. I am making you my heir. But I don't even know your name."

"Pierrot," Pierrot told him.

"Of course," said Mounnezergues, "you will only inherit on one condition : that you take my place here and that you become the guardian of the chapel."

"I understand, sir."

"And you will see that my funeral takes place according to the instructions which I am leaving. I may as well tell you that I wish to be buried beside the Poldavian princes whom for so many years I have so faithfully served. You will have to obtain the necessary authorization from the Council. Tomorrow you will take this letter to my solicitor. The address is on it."

"Yes, sir." He wanted to humour the old man.

"You may leave me now," said Mounnezergues.

"But . . ." said Pierrot.

"No, no, I don't need anyone. Just close that window and come back tomorrow or the next day to see if I'm dead. I much prefer to be alone during this transition. Goodbye, my boy, and thank you."

Pierrot shook his hand, a hand already going limp, and went out, closing the door gently behind him.

There were fewer people now in front of the Zoo, but Pierrot no longer wanted to go in. He didn't even want to pass by the paybox where Yvonne worked. He preferred to go to the films.

Next day, when he went to take Mounnezergues's letter to the solicitors, he found that he'd lost it, or left it behind at the old man's house, probably. In any case, the codicil had got hung up somewhere. Pierrot hesitated to go back that same day, for if Mounnezergues was still alive he might consider this haste to establish his death unseemly; or, if he had found the letter, might blame Pierrot for his carelessness.

So Pierrot didn't go until the Tuesday. He tried to open the door. He pulled the bell and it rang. Who could have

fixed it up again? Better still, someone opened the door to him.

"Excuse me, ma'am," began Pierrot.

Then stopped. It was Yvonne. He said with a pleasant smile:

"I think, ma'am, we've met before. D'you remember Palinsac and Saint-Mouézy-sur-Eon?"

"Oh, of course. You were the truck-driver who picked me up on the road."

"That's right."

"I'm glad to see you again, Monsieur . . . Monsieur . . . What was the name again?"

"Pierrot."

"And what were you looking for, Monsieur Pierrot?"

"I came to ask after Monsieur Mounnezergues."

"Monsieur Mounnezergues?" exclaimed Yvonne.

"Monsieur Mounnezergues? D'you know him then?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh well, he's gone off to the country for a rest. He's not been very well these last few days. Can I give him a message or anything for you?"

Although Yvonne was holding the door ajar, Pierrot could see in the garden signs of activity which looked to him like spring-cleaning on a large scale, and in two big dustbins not yet collected by the Council he spotted some broken fragments of bric-à-brac and, in one of them, a waxen hand. Yvonne wore round her head the turban of a capable housewife. And she asked him once more if he had any message to give Mounnezergues.

"No, I can't say I have."

He looked round him.

The chapel was gilded in the sun, and the trees in the little square shivered softly. An animal growled on the other side of the wall. A breakdown-lorry belonging to the garage on the corner—where the Café Posidon had been!—was tugging along a smashed-up sports-car. The shutters over the windows of Mounnezergues's house, which gave onto the street, were aggressively shut.

"No, can't say I have," repeated Pierrot.

"Come back a little later," said Yvonne, "in a month or two's time."

"Right-o," said Pierrot, "I will. 'Bye, ma'am."

"'Bye, Monsieur Pierrot. I'll tell Monsieur Mounnezergues you came to ask after him."

"That's right," said Pierrot. "Goodbye."

She closed the door.

With a last look at the two dustbins Pierrot walked away.

At the corner of the street he stopped. He burst out laughing.

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